

The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the
degree of Doctor of Education by **Lindsay Jayne Hanrahan.**

August 2017

Declaration

The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Signed: L J Hanrahan _____ (Lindsay Jayne Hanrahan)

28.08.2017

Table of contents	Page number:
Abstract	5
Summary of portfolio	6
Acknowledgements	8
Chapter One: Introduction	9
1.1 Preface	9
1.2 Background	10
1.3 A personal interest	11
1.4 Analytical framework and approaching the study	12
1.5 Outline of thesis	27
Chapter Two: Literature Review	27
2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review	28
2.2 The Oppression of Women and Marxist Feminism	28
2.3 Challenges and chances, the implications of changing identities	34
2.4 Social capital	36
2.5 Division of labour	39
2.6 Power, dominance and being dominated	44
2.7 Education and gender bias	48
2.8 Gender and gendered education	52
2.9 Networks of support	54
2.10 Choice and travel	59
2.11 The journey towards change	60
2.12 A holistic approach	65
2.13 Widening participation initiatives in education	69
Chapter Three: Methodology	82
3.1 Introduction and aims of research	82
3.2 Research questions and focus of study	82
3.3 Essence of ethnography	84
3.4 An investigative exploratory inductive position	85
3.5 Research design	92
3.6 Research methods	93
3.7 Sample, accessibility and establishing relations	102
3.8 Coming to know the data	105
3.9 Reliability and validity in qualitative research	113
3.10 Ethics	115

Chapter Four: Introducing the Participants	119
4.1 Introducing Lucy	119
4.2 Introducing Jill	120
4.3 Introducing Zoe	120
4.4 Introducing Sally	121
4.5 Introducing Ruby	121
Chapter Five: Findings and Discussion	122
5.1 Motivations and aspirations	123
5.2 Challenges to learning	146
5.3 Networks of support	167
5.4 Learning communities	174
Chapter Six: Conclusions	194
References	204
Appendix	
Appendix A. Ethical Approval from the Faculty	
Appendix B. Participant Information Sheet	
Appendix C. Invitation Letter	
Appendix D. Consent Form	
Appendix E. Overview of Participants	
Appendix F. Interview Guide	
Appendix G. An adapted stage of analysis model taken from Cohen et al., (2007)	

Abstract

There is a substantial body of knowledge into the factors that can influence women's experiences of Higher Education (HE) such as social class, ethnicity and gender. Additionally, there is a significant focus on women and education in relation to their academic abilities such as comparing their achievement in terms of their gender. However, much of this research focuses on attainment between groups such as men and women or explores the impact of one specific characteristic.

The principal aim of my study was to explore the experiences of a small group of women who had returned to education and entered HE. Through a series of conversations their unique stories were revealed, including the challenges and opportunities that they had encountered. The original contribution to knowledge that my study makes is in the way it documents five mature women's experiences who traditionally would not have been expected to go to university. These women are working class, with caring responsibilities, who did not anticipate a time in their lives when they would continue into HE. To attain an undergraduate degree or professional qualification seemed beyond their particular sphere.

In this study, the stories of five women over the age of twenty-one, returning to HE is captured and reveals the complex issues faced as they navigated their way through unfamiliar territory. During the research recurring themes emerged in the women's experiences including personal motivations and aspirations, challenges to learning, networks of support and learning communities which shaped their time in HE.

My ethnographic analysis of their stories is framed by my own experience of returning to HE and is viewed through the lens of feminist theory. The overall conclusions from the research reveal that the five women were able to complete their courses successfully and highlights a range of positive factors about returning to education including the opportunity to engage with fellow students, increasing personal confidence and independence and developing understandings, knowledge and skills.

However, my study also illustrates the real barriers and constraints to learning that proved to be tough for the women to overcome both emotionally and practically. By examining several Marxist feminist writers such as Benston (1969) and Putnam Tong (1993), I recognised how women may be oppressed or restricted in their choices based on the numerous roles that they must perform in the home. For some of the women, attempting to study in addition to fulfilling other domestic and caring responsibilities proved to be very demanding. Overall, the research highlights the complexities that this group of non-traditional students face when attempting to improve their prospects and fulfil hitherto latent potential.

Summary of portfolio

To set the thesis in context with previous work that I have completed on the doctoral programme, I have listed below an overview of this work and a brief explanation of each piece.

- **PR7001 Component One: A discussion of the theory of the methods of selected methodological paradigms appropriate to a given research question (s) arising from practice.**

This work highlighted the range of methods used in the research process including key strengths and weaknesses. I then selected and critiqued a framework to explore and investigate working practices in my work setting as a Student Support Coordinator in a secondary school.

- **PR7001 Component Two: A research report on the application of a selected research methodology (ies) to a small-scale enquiry within a practice/professional setting.**

'The Common Assessment Framework (CAF): A multi-agency response in a secondary school setting'.

This assignment provided an opportunity through a small-scale project to use ethnographic tools including interviews and observations and developed some practical skills with participants such as listening techniques. I also investigated the implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and discovered factors that had an impact on the working practices of one team of professionals.

- **PR7002 Component One: Social Theory and Education: Key Issues and Debates.**

'Are Willis' Theories still applicable?'

- **PR7002 Component Two: Social Theory and Education: Key Issues and Debates.**

'Are Willis' Theories still applicable?'

The two parts analysed the work of Paul Willis' study *'Learning to Labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs?'* (1977). Through examining key features of his ethnographic approach, I could connect key similarities to an educational setting and one specific support team in a secondary school. This also explored the disengagement of disaffected pupils alongside the interventions and alternative provisions being introduced by the setting to address any barriers to learning.

- **PR2003 Policy into Practice for Integrated Working.**

'Every Child Matters'

This assignment critically assessed the impact of policy on practice in a multi-professional environment. It specifically focused on the 'Every Child Matters' agenda that is linked to a range of safeguarding literature alongside multi-agency guidelines and addressed how one particular team took account of their recommendations.

- **PR2005 Creativity into Practice.**

'Creativity and one social inclusion team'

This work discussed how various ideas, theories and models have been used to promote creativity in the curriculum through the perspective of selected professionals from one social inclusion team. It contains primary qualitative research including reference to interviews and observations that helped highlight and then investigate practices and issues.

- **PR8002 Institutions, Discontinuities and Systems of Thought.**

'The Troubled Families' agenda'

This work considered the 'Troubled Families' agenda introduced by the Coalition Government in 2011 to support 'troubled families' to overcome issues such as anti-social behaviour, unemployment and poor school attendance. In addition to this, it explored several philosophical thinkers, including Hobbes (1651, 1957), in consideration of this initiative and the wider role of the government.

- **PR8001 Component One: Thesis in context.**

'Working class women as mature learners'

This component was a proposal for the thesis and consisted of a literature review and plan of the design and methods to be used. It also included an ethical, reflective and critically informed discussion of the philosophy and theory selected ethnographic methodological paradigm.

- **PR8001 Component Two: Thesis in context.**

This essay identified and critically evaluated alternative approaches that might have been used to address the research topic proposed.

Overall, the work completed during the taught stage of the doctoral programme shaped my knowledge and understanding and influenced the final decisions made about the thesis. The issues explored through my studies such as barriers to learning, professional development and more generally the experiences of learners encouraged me to examine the journey of a group of women returning to education. Moreover, the insight gained from using ethnography in two small scale research projects in my earlier work supported this research in several stages such as the planning, collection of data and writing-up of findings.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the five women for agreeing to provide their time for this research and I would also like to thank the contributors overall for giving me consent to conduct a series of interviews focused on women's experiences of Higher Education (HE). Furthermore, I would like to thank Professor Jeff Adams and his team for their guidance and feedback. Additionally, I am extremely grateful to Dr Jane McKay, Dr Frances Atherton and Dr Paul Moran for all their continued time, patience and support with the completion of my thesis. Finally, I am indebted to my family and five children for supporting me unreservedly throughout my studies and sharing my colourful journey through HE.

Chapter One Introduction

'The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education'

1.1 Preface

This research has focused on the experiences of five women who have returned to education and decided to study at Higher Education (HE) following a gap in their learning. The focus of the study was on a group of women who appear to have experienced a cultural shift that has caused tension between this non-traditional group of individuals. This has challenged their identity, norms and values and has resulted in them having to surpass various barriers to learning. Although the women may have been seeking an escape from their circumstances, throughout our conversations it became evident that their studying was heavily compromised by other things such as work commitments and caring responsibilities. Additionally, the women may have initially strived for more independence, however in reality their experiences seemed to be very different from other students and these experiences are captured through their journeys through HE.

Through our conversations, I gained insight into the women's experiences and my original contribution to knowledge considered the positive, negative and at times unpredictable features of their accounts through their personal narratives. I acknowledge that my study does not address other aspects that may be viewed as influential or having an enabling or detrimental impact on other individuals' studies such as ethnicity, but I considered the parameters of my research and selected to allow the women to tell their stories unreservedly without imposing my own agenda on their responses. Thus, I accepted that their experiences

may or may not concur with previous other studies outlined in the literature review. I recognised the limits of my findings and how my choice of interviewing a group of five women may have restricted the areas examined more than using a larger sample of students. However, considering other studies into women's experiences of HE and wider writings based on the challenges met by non-traditional students enabled a more diverse understanding of the complexities that this group overcame to complete a qualification at HE. This may have been less problematic for other cohorts of students with fewer obligations.

1.2 Background

There have been several studies covering this topic such as Peters (2000) and Pascall and Cox (1993) that consider the motivations and practical matters of returning to education. Peters (2000) investigates the experiences of a selection of mature women who are entering HE in the UK and examines the motivational factors, everyday issues and how they impacted on their studies. It also considers other influential aspects including the construct of HE institutions and the relationships between staff and students on learners' experiences. Pascall and Cox's (1993) study was based on forty-three interviews with mature women about their experiences of returning to education including the challenges, aspirations and anxieties. This captured their accounts and later reflections drawing upon the women's relationships to education, outlining some of the reasons why older students return to education and discussing the relationship of women and work. Both studies contributed to a larger debate about access to HE and the experiences of mature women students.

Within this context and to take this understanding further, my research focused on a group of mature women students who had decided to return to formal learning following a gap in their learning and I wanted to develop an understanding of their experiences and discover what their journey had been like. This study also provided the insight into the reality of how studying has affected women's lives enhancing existing knowledge and highlighting unforeseen enabling factors or restrictions.

1.3 A personal interest

My own journey in HE was a catalyst for this study. Throughout my time at university I have encountered numerous challenges such as caring responsibilities for my children and other family members and changes in employment from an educational role to social care. My family have assisted my studies by offering emotional and financial support and helped care for my children. I have considered abandoning my studies at various points in my journey due to difficulties of finding the time to meet the requirements of being a mature student completing a course at university. However, I have been motivated by the desire to learn and encouragement from my friends and family.

My experiences in a previous position as Student Support Coordinator in a Secondary School observed changes in roles and responsibilities of employees and how their training needs developed because of this. For example, I noticed the promotion of collaborative working between sectors that later resulted in changes in the workforce such as new roles, responsibilities and training opportunities for professionals. Due to this, a few women

decided to return to education and complete a HE course to increase their knowledge, skills and future employment prospects. In specific relation to the women in the team, this required them to juggle employment alongside studying and family commitments. Some of the women expressed difficulties managing their time between the competing tasks and had several challenges to returning to learning. As I had a supervisory role for these women, I could listen to their experiences in supervision sessions including their perceived barriers to studying including the time they had available, anxieties about entering university as a mature student and the implications that these changes might have on their home life. This insight alongside my personal aspiration to return to education, encouraged me to discover why women decide to return to education despite the real challenges this decision may present. I recognised from the onset of the study that my motivations and reasons for returning to education were specific to my personal circumstances, therefore I decided to focus on one group of women to capture their individual experiences of learning.

1.4 Analytical framework and approaching the study

It is important to understand the complexity of categorising one as a woman. Butler (1990) disputes the idea that women can be categorised as a distinctive identity, however, in my research, I refer to 'women' as an overarching category, defined as 'adult human being' or 'female' (Collins, 2017). Additionally, to specifically examine mature women's experiences of HE we must have an agreed definition of what defines a mature student in an educational context. For this research, as per UCAS (2017), mature students will be regarded as "anyone over the age of 21 who didn't go to university after school or college".

The Feminist Movement: Key Feminist Thinkers.

The research looks at the experiences of five women through the perspective of Marxist Feminism and I acknowledge that adopting this standpoint may involve potential challenges such as justifying the appropriateness of my qualitative approach. This is examined in the methodology chapter in addition to a discussion about the intricacies of managing a research study as an inexperienced researcher. However, I hoped to address the topic 'The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education', through an interpretative inquiry (Guba, and Lincoln, 1994).

hooks (1984; 2000) argues that the feminist movement is a means to tackle the oppression of women and explores the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. hooks (1984, p. 5) comments on how, "being oppressed means the absence of choices" and argues that although women have a degree of choice in some instances, this is restricted by discrimination and exploitation that inevitably limits them. I drew upon feminist theory including Dianne Reay, Carol Hanisch and bell hooks as a conceptual framework for the research because of its relevance to examining the experiences of women. For example, women returning to education are faced with a complex set of decisions to make considering their individual circumstances.

This is demonstrated by Mannay and Morgan's (2013) study which deliberates the 'emotional cost' that mature mothers returning to education must contemplate in addition to other factors such as the women's motivations and disappointments. It explores changes in identity, educational cultures and social class. This exemplifies the need for support that is relevant to

this cohort of students to improve retention rates and successes. They highlight how this group are susceptible to dropping out of university as the emotional cost is often too high for them to continue. This is supported by Thomas and Jamieson-Ball (2011) who contend that some institutions have started to modify their strategies to support mature students through an innovative approach that incorporates their needs by adapting teaching, timetabling and financial matters. Milburn (2012, p. 61) argues that this requires universities to offer increased support in a more intensive way and proposes that “a holistic approach is needed, both across services and across the period spent at university”.

My study allows for a multifaceted range of issues to be explored through the women’s accounts. The impact of these complexities can be understood through a feminist perspective and demonstrated by how factors interlink with one another such as gender and social class (Brah & Phoenix, 2013; Allen & Baber, 1992). In relation to HE, this may include areas such as access to education, increased financial pressures or additional roles and responsibilities in the family.

In terms of feminist theory and its relationship to women returning to HE, it is important to discuss its distinctive links to the different strands within feminism (Fuss, 2013) to have an awareness of the diverse issues women encounter. Feminist theory is undoubtedly pertinent in this study to be drawn in as a lens to explore aspects such as the complex nature of women’s lives and multi-layered roles that they fulfil including any domestic and caring responsibilities (Benston, 1969) and in general the interests that they pursue. However, feminist theory is diverse, and I have predominantly examined key writers such as Putnam

Tong, Benston, De Beauvoir, Snyder, Irigaray, Butler, Young and Oakley to illustrate the main areas that are related to my study.

To contextualise the historical underpinnings that have influenced key actions and legislation derived from feminism, it is useful to have an overview of significant milestones of the feminist movement and influential feminist thinkers. These individuals have shaped women's movements from early first wave feminism in the 19th and early 20th Century to more recent third wave and fourth wave feminism (Snyder, 2008).

To begin, first wave feminism primarily focused on tackling the inequalities in the legal system (Chamberlain, 2016) demonstrated by women's suffrage to enable women to have equal voting powers. However, this was not achieved until later and the vote was gained for all women over 21 in 1928. There were several marked achievements that derived from this period of feminist activity including the presentation of the Married Women's Property Act, 1870 and the reformation of education for girls at secondary school level and Higher Education (Chamberlain, 2016; Wrye, 2009). One of the most influential thinkers of this time was Mary Wollstonecraft whose innovative text 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792) is one of the first attempts to bring issues of discrimination based on gender to the forefront of the agenda. Noted as a key liberal feminist, Wollstonecraft argues that the state must protect women and their civil rights including the right to vote and claims that women should have freedom of speech and the right to own property. Following the first wave of feminism, the focus gradually shifted to wider issues of women's equality in society.

From the 1960s to approximately the 1980's, second wave feminism endeavoured to address more domestic and labour-based issues (Chamberlain, 2016; Wrye, 2009) and this is explored further in this thesis as it is pertinent to many of the issues faced by the women in the research. Simone de Beauvoir's ideas captured in her ground-breaking and influential text 'The Second Sex (1949)' suggested a fresh approach to thinking about how women are positioned in society and the roles that they fulfil. She attempted to offer new thinking in relation to the relationships between men and women contextualised through social construction that placed women as the 'other'. Second wave feminism including De Beauvoir examined the family and the workplace and the restrictions that women often have placed on them because of their roles and responsibilities (Snyder, 2008). According to Wrye (2009, p.185), second wave feminism differed from first wave feminism in several ways as she stated that first wave feminism mainly focused on "political change, ignited the suffragettes' successful lobby for women's right to vote, championed the abolition of slavery, and broadly supported women's education". Whereas, second wave feminism drew attention to other issues including "rigid sex roles; claimed economic parity; validated women's desire for sexual pleasure; and widened feminism's scope to take in critical differences among women, from sexuality to class to race and ethnicity".

Hanisch is also viewed as a Radical Feminist (Echols, 1989) was a founding member of the New York Radical Women (1967) movement in addition to having a crucial role in the Miss America Protest of 1968. The contribution of Carol Hanisch cannot be overlooked as she is best known for her work 'The Personal is Political' (1969) exploring the impact of patriarchy and sexism on women's lives. Betty Friedan, in her pioneering work, *The Feminine Mystique*

(1963) is often acknowledged as the initiator of the second wave and was unambiguous in her championing for women to have personal ambition and to do so without regret or concern. However, one of the main criticisms deriving from second wave feminism is that the emergence of the homogenous group 'women' with the overarching categorisation of women irrespective of personally defining individual characteristics. bell hooks work 'Ain't I a Woman' (1981) recognised black femininity and how inequalities such as race and social class required the consideration of multiple feminisms. I draw on bell hooks work at several points in the thesis as it was influential in the development of third wave feminism and the need for multiple feminisms claiming that there could not be a singular view of a woman.

The early 1990s saw the emergence of third wave feminism (Snyder, 2008) noted by Rebecca Walker's well-known declaration- "I am the Third Wave" (Walker, 2006. p. 5). In addition, Judith Butler is an influential figure who contended how patriarchal oppression categorises women and contests this stance as being dismissive of women. Her provocative work 'Gender Trouble' (1990) is unequivocal in its resistance of an essentialist view of the female or gender. Additionally, Rebecca Walker is one of the key influential third wave feminist writers who focused on areas including politics, gender, race and strived for social justice. Subsequently, Crenshaw (1991;1989) is also an important writer in terms of intersectionality and this is considered in the literature review due to its links to for example, race, social class and gender. Snyder-Hall (2010) draws attention to aspects such as male dominance and analyses the struggle for gender equality. Moreover, Snyder (2008, p.193) captures this viewpoint in the following extract;

Third-wave feminism is not yet a social movement—and it may never be. Because it strives to be inclusive of all, collective action constitutes one of its biggest challenges, and one that it shares with other antifoundationalist discourses, such as radical democracy. In fact, third-wave feminism is not unlike radical democracy. Both require the constant engagement of participants in the struggle for a better world. There are no predetermined answers and no guarantees of success, just the inspiration for critical engagement with the lived messiness of contemporary life.

Irigaray (1996) examines sexuality and identity and these are other key areas explored by third wave writers. Her ideas around particular identity, universal through gender and sexual difference were thought-provoking. The work of Irigaray is also examined throughout the thesis as these appeared to be relevant issues for the five women in the research.

Finally, from approximately 2012 onwards fourth wave feminist writers such as Ealasaid Munro (2013); Penny (2013) and Faludi (1991) examined the history of feminism and feminist politics including the role of social media in the portrayal and representation of women. Moreover, Looft (2017) examines the 'Girlgaze' project aimed at enabling aspiring female photographers an opportunity to enter a typical male dominated industry. She examines this project contextualised by fourth wave feminism and explores how this project contests and challenges this profession by considering the portrayal and representation of women. This is relevant to my study as the women in my research experienced a variety of challenges entering HE and did not feel that they were expected to continue into HE or enter certain areas of employment.

Phillips, Ruth, Cree and Vivienne (2014) claim that defining fourth wave feminism can be problematic and this is explored in their article 'What does the 'Fourth Wave' Mean for

Teaching Feminism in Twenty-First Century Social Work? . They state that in specific relation to social work practices it is useful to have a feminist understanding of issues that are pertinent to service users. These areas include; social theory and evidence-based research and practices. They also contend that fourth wave feminism and the emergence of the internet have been driving factors in the increased interest in feminism today. In addition to this, Chamberlain (2016) considers the negative connotations attached to fourth wave feminism and highlights the opposing positions. However, although defining fourth wave feminism may be controversial, some of the key issues of fourth wave feminist thinkers include the internet, harassment in the workplace, university and it challenges the perceived rape culture which are ongoing issues for debate (Aune and Dean, (2015); Evans, (2015) and Cochrane (2013). Furthermore, Wrye (2009, p. 185) claims that “Fourth Wave distinguishes itself by stressing spirituality” and focuses on the relationship between “the planet and all its beings, putting themselves in the service of the world, ecology, and the downtrodden”.

In summary, this section has acknowledged the immensity of emancipation and has recalled the four waves of Feminism and drawn upon some of the key feminist thinkers of these times. However, due to the parameters of the research, I am focusing on the key ideas of for example, Simone de Beauvoir, Carol Hanisch, Judith Butler, Claire Snyder-Hall and Rebecca Walker and the data presented to reflect and relate to the voices of the women interviewed.

To conclude, the central features observed by many second and third wave feminists are applicable to my study as it analyses the changing roles of women, identities and how this is construed by society and the effect this has on women’s lives. Second wave feminism

including Simone de Beauvoir and Carol Hanisch offer an insight into the expanding roles of women from a traditional role as a wife and mother by adopting an investigative approach to equalities and discrimination in society including within education and the workplace. Third wave feminist writers including Judith Butler, Claire Snyder-Hall and Rebecca Walker explore the idea of individuality and choice that is pertinent to my study as it scrutinises aspects such as identity, notions of gender and gender roles, expectations and stereotypes. Furthermore, Snyder (2008, p.178) highlights the relevance of both second and third wave feminism as she states,

Second-wave feminism still exists...a woman's understanding of what feminism means has more to do with where and when she entered the discourse than it does with the year of her birth...consequently, it is more helpful to understand third wave feminism as a particular approach rather than using it to label women born within certain years or who occupy a certain age group.

Feminism offers understanding into the contested constructs and discourses used in respects of women. It also considers the language used to define women and outlines further changes that are needed. Snyder (2008, p. 175) explores the, "tactical approach," that third wave feminism offers that has developed from second wave feminism as she claims that it presents a "multiperspectival" view of feminism. Additionally, it embraces, "multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political." It also responds to the "divisiveness of the sex wars," with an, "inclusive and non-judgemental approach". Therefore, responding by moving beyond the issues raised in a second wave approach.

Butler (1990) critiques feminist theory and challenges the idea of identity by arguing that 'women' cannot be categorised as an overarching category as there are distinctive identities based on aspects like social class, sexuality and ethnicity. Subsequently, Butler (1990, p. 8) highlights that these assumptions are based on the patriarchal nature of society. She offers an alternative viewpoint on feminism that critiques gender and identity, thus contests the central argument offered by a 'split' in feminism. For example, Butler's (1990) provocative text 'Gender Trouble' challenges the reader to deconstruct 'sex' that is assumed to be biologically determined and 'gender' as socially constructed as two separate distinctions and recognise this divide on feminism. Butler (1990, p. 8) argues that the two "sexed bodies" cannot exist without one another and that both are constructed by language and politics and states; "the distinction between sex and gender serves an argument that whatever biologically intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex." Therefore, Butler (1990, p. 9) explains that, "gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes," thus, rejecting the categorisation of women.

Butler (1990, p. 11) examines the work of De Beauvoir in 'The Second Sex' and explores how gender is constructed and because of this one 'becomes' a woman through a culturally constructed process that determines a person's outcome. For De Beauvoir, gender is viewed as an aspect of identity that is developed gradually. De Beauvoir argues that men oppress women in various ways through categorising them as 'other' as De Beauvoir (1997, p. 609) recalls; "Woman herself recognises that the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it, ruled it, and still dominate it today are men". Through this oppression, the man

adopts the position as the 'self' and the woman becomes 'other' therefore, he is presented as the absolute that fundamentally implies that women are incomplete and inessential in some way. This represents the idea that women are waiting and need man's assistance and are subordinate to men. This is demonstrated in the extract below;

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (De Beauvoir, 1997, p. 295)

This portrays the notion of 'other' aligned with patriarchal oppression and offers a thought provoking idea that feminine gender identity is viewed as an important aspect of women's qualities. It seems that women are presented as needing to be assisted by men to function adequately. Equally, those adopting De Beauvoir's stance such as Butler (1990, p. 13) would claim that "only feminine gender is marked, that the universal person and masculine gender are conflated". In turn, this would define women in regards of their sex and, "extolling men as bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood" through a male centered philosophy. This relates to my work as it highlights the challenges women face and how they are often expected to prioritise assumed roles assigned to them based on their gender. Additionally, Wrye (2009, p. 185) claims that second wave feminism explores "gender pluralities; "having it all"; and juggling career, sex, and motherhood" that seemed to be a real challenge for the women in my study.

A key feature of feminist research strives for equality and liberation (Crotty, 1998, p. 182) and the essence of third wave feminism including thinkers such as Snyder-Hall, (2010) recognise

that only through challenging the oppression faced by women (Allen & Baber, 1992) can they truly make choices. Through adopting this theoretical lens, feminist theory offers an analysis of the oppressive issues (Avis & Turner, 1996) and dominant structures experienced by women and how they act to oppress women. Consequently, Allen and Baber (1992, p. 42) suggest that there is, “no single form of feminism,” and that there is, “no women's story, but rather a multitude of voices that sometimes speak together, but often speak separately.”

In my research, although I recognised that there may be unities amongst the women's experiences, I realised that each woman's experience is unique. Therefore, through the interviews in the research women had an opportunity to exercise an individual 'voice' (Allen & Baber, 1992; Gilligan, 1982) and although there may be collective commonalities amongst the women's experiences it also offers individualist approach to understanding their accounts. On reflection, I feel that my study aligns itself to third wave feminism as described by Snyder (2008) in its emancipatory ideals as it illustrates the difficulties that mature self-proclaimed working-class women encounter in attempting to gain liberation through education. It also possibly documents their struggle for equality in comparison to more typical groups such as white middle-class males.

The nature of HE

A wider context for the study is the ongoing drive in educational policy to increase the number of non-traditional students into university. Throughout the twentieth century, Egerton and Halsey (1993) suggest that there have been two main areas regarding access to education

including an expansion in the number of students entering HE and a decrease in gender inequalities. However, although there have been significant developments such as these, relative social class inequalities remain. For example, the number of women entering HE has now exceeded the number of men (Arnott, David & Weiner, 1999) but there are still considerable discrepancies in class differences.

Many initiatives such as the 'National strategy for access and student success in higher education' published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in April 2014 aim to improve the outcomes for students returning to HE and their vision specifies;

We want the student population in higher education to better reflect the rich diversity of the general population in England. This means creating a system which delivers equality of opportunity and fairness and in which a person's age, ethnicity, gender, disability and/or social background present no barriers to them accessing and succeeding in higher education and beyond' (National strategy for access and student success in higher education, 2014, p. 7).

This illustrates the then Coalition Government's drive to increase participation and achievements amongst non-traditional groups of students including mature students and create a more diverse student population in HE. However, evidence presented by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) suggests that these factors can be extremely influential on participation rates in HE further demonstrated by a decrease in the number of mature students applying to university demonstrated below;

The rising trends reported by UCAS for young applicants are not mirrored in older age groups in England. Application rates through UCAS in 2013 (up to March 2013) for people aged 23 and older fell by between 3 and 10 per cent; this followed a drop of between 15 and 20 per cent for people over 19 in the 2012 application cycle' (National strategy for access and student success in higher education, 2014, p. 26).

There are different reasons why individuals decide to enter university that are unique to each student and there are also commonalities amongst certain groups. For example, Chowdry, Crawford, Dearden, Goodman, and Vignoles, (2013) examine the determinants of students including the impact of socio-economic backgrounds of students on widening participation rates and how this has a detrimental impact on the number of students not only entering HE but achievement. The paper examines data from universities in England to understand the causes of participation in HE amongst students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The data focuses on the population of two sets of pupils that may have entered the system in 2004–2005 and 2006–2007 between the ages of 11 to age 20. This paper illustrates that participation rates of students from a low socio-economic background are disproportionate across high ranking universities; individuals in lower socio-economic groups are greatly affected by low academic achievement at the point of secondary education. Chowdry et al. (2013) argue that a more important point in explaining lower HE participation rates is due to early educational experiences than difficulties that students may face at the point of entry to HE. These findings suggest that there is a need for earlier intervention to increase participation among students from poorer backgrounds.

Earlier attempts such as the Anderson (1960) and Robbin's Report (1963) suggested that education should be accessible to any individual who had the academic ability to achieve a

qualification regardless of their social class and financial circumstances. Consequently, this resulted in a 50 per cent increase in participation rates between 1963 and 1968. The Anderson (1960) and Robbins Report (1963) also illustrated a further decrease in class inequalities between 1970 and 1980. The earlier work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1979) on French universities proposes that middle-class students characterised a greater representation at university and Gillon (1999); Blackburn and Jarman, (1993) argue that although there was significantly more growth in the number of individuals participating in HE class disparities have consistently persisted. They stated that this disparity is also evident in the labour market as students' expectations and later achievements were often shaped by gender and class inequalities. Additionally, as many women students enter a caring profession, Blackburn and Jarmin (1993) identify that these expectations are "realistic" based on the "sex divided realities of the labour-market" (Arnott, David & Weiner, 1999, p. 121).

Burke, 2013; Reay, David and Ball (2005) including the OECD 1998 suggests that there have been considerable developments within the demographics of HE such as changes in the functioning of institutions and the characteristics of students (Burke, 2013). This is exemplified by an expansion in participation rates from below 10 per cent in the 1960s to over 33 per cent in 1996 (OECD, 1998) with specific emphasis on the increase in female students entering HE. However, Reay et al. (2005) highlight how this continued increase in the number of females has not necessarily resulted in equalities in achievement across different subject areas. This may have some correlation with the women in this study who all completed qualifications in social sciences, art and nursing.

As noted earlier, many women entering HE are embarking on a course of study to enable them to get roles within caring professions where there are continued discrepancies between salaries based on gender and class inequalities (Arnot, 1999; Blackburn & Jarmin, 1993). This illustrates that not only do inequalities exist in subject areas at the point of schooling, but that there are also inequalities within employment. In relation to my study, many of the women interviewed did not feel that they had achieved their full potential or that there had been emphasis on them to continue to enter HE. Others expressed that they believed that their current level of qualification was disadvantaging them in the workplace and wanted to improve their prospects. Overall, my study enabled the women to tell their stories, reflect on their experiences and share their journey of how they had navigated many of the issues discussed to return to education.

1.5 Outline of thesis

In this chapter, I have outlined the aims of the study and specified what I hope to achieve in this research. The remaining chapters are organised as follows. Chapter two contextualises the study through presenting key literature. Chapter three identifies the research methodology and methods selected. In chapter four, Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Sally and Ruby are introduced and the themes emerging from our conversations are discussed. Finally, in chapter six the research study is concluded.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This chapter will consider the experiences of returning to education as a mature woman. This will be by adopting a Marxist Feminist perspective and by looking at the influences of such factors as social class and gender to explore issues that may be influential on the experiences of students. However, I acknowledge that they are interlinked and overlap in several areas. Firstly, I will examine areas such as Marxist Feminism as a theoretical lens to my study and then secondly, influences including factors such as motivations, aspirations and expectations, networks of support, HE provisions, and location will be considered. Finally, by taking a wider approach, I aim to outline some of the benefits of returning to education. However, factors that may be viewed as problematic or have a detrimental effect of the experiences of mature women students will also be discussed including challenges to learning such as managing time and other roles including employment and responsibilities within the home.

2.2 The Oppression of Women and Marxist Feminism

In this section, I will present a rationale for using Marxist Feminism as a theoretical lens to the study. Through the analysis of inequalities, feminist theory examines key areas such as stereotyping, discrimination, objectification and oppression (Fuss, 2013). For example, historically the status of men and women in society has often been juxtaposed based on specific roles and functions. One of the principles of a Marxist Feminist perspective is that it makes a connection between the oppression of women and capitalism through their

subordination (Putnam Tong, 2013). This highlights the inequalities that women experience as a direct result of the exploitation that they are subjected to by the labour market and in the home.

In western society, women may experience male dominance by their husbands in the family unit and are viewed as 'private property' (Davidoff & Hall, 2013) oppressed through a capitalist system (Brown, O'Laughlin, Remy, Williams & Young, 1974). Tong (2013) suggests a distinctive connection between feminist thought and Marxist ideology. For example, a Marxist standpoint outlines the structure of modern society and the implications that these arrangements have on women (Vogel, 2013). Furthermore, Coward (1983, p. 130) noted that "Marxism has had a constant engagement with feminism" with specific emphasis to its links with the family. Marxist Feminism illustrates the relationships between domestic labour, relations and the family (Barrett, 1988) including the labour at home performed by women. Margaret Benston's (1969) Marxist feminist study: 'The political economy of women's liberation' emphasises the value of the unpaid labour women perform within the family. In my research, this is a particularly significant point as mature women are often doing this role in addition to their studies and caring for their family. Through this Marxist Feminist critique, it suggests that women are oppressed and are responsible for the 'reproduction of labour power' (Luxton & Armstrong, 1991). Consequently, it claims that women's 'domestic labour' and 'wage labour' are a crucial part of capitalism. Through this commonality, women are grouped together as a separate 'class' based on their domestic labour.

Maushart (2001) offers an alternative viewpoint of the relationship between women, their husbands and the home. This perspective highlights how women act as a 'gate keeper' limiting the involvement of others and subsequently restricting the husband from interfering with tasks. This portrays that the home is a place of dominance for some women as it enables them to take control of an aspect of their lives that they regulate and manage. This argument presents a domestic sphere that is dominated by women and not governed by men. Mannay and Morgan (2013, p. 63) suggest that this is based on the idea of "respectable working-class femininity" whereby the woman must maintain a high level of cleanliness within the home. Therefore, to ensure the standards of cleaning are adequate the woman takes control of all duties and fulfils the role of domesticity. Brines (1994, p. 656) outlines how women specialise through this trade and states;

Housework – unpaid labour performed within the household – is by definition without exchange value in the classic sense; that is, it is nonportable or illiquid as a form of currency beyond the specific relationship, unlike what the main breadwinner brings to the trade.

However, De Beauvoir (2014) exposes the ways that masculine ideology exploits the sexual difference to create systems of inequality and argues that economic independence is that key to women's independence.

From a structural perspective, such as Marxism and Functionalism (Scott, 2014) the stratification of individuals is presented in terms of class (Marx & Engels, 2001), power (Foucault, 1980) and status (Bourdieu, 1986) based on an individual perceived 'function' in society (Durkheim, 1982). In this instance, an individual's behaviour and actions in society is an indicator of social cohesion and solidarity or social conflict. Functionalism (Durkheim,

1982) exacerbates the significance of a 'moral consensus' (Giddens, 2009) in upholding a stable and efficient society (Durkheim, 1984) and the importance of social solidarity. Therefore, in relation to women from a Marxist Feminist perspective and the roles that women perform in the family home and society all aid the cohesion within the family unit and the social order. Without this positioning, the effects may be the breakdown of relationships within the home and could result in other pressures on a wider level for society if a woman's traditional role is challenged. One example of this may be if the woman wants to start work and gain employment and change her role from the primary caregiver, wife and homemaker it may have implications for the unity in the home and changes in the makeup of the workforce (Mark-Lawson & Witz, 1988).

This suggests that the labour traditionally assigned to women regarding work within the home has a symbolic value in terms of defining an identity. This identity is subject to other identities, shaped by capitalism and defined by a hierarchical system. This may consist of one identity at the bottom of the ranking, which facilitates other identities higher up the system. Bourdieu's (1991; 1989) concept of symbolic power illustrates how one must conform considering the social hierarchy. More specifically, this relates to the dominance experienced by women in the 'field' through gender as a form of social categorisation. This results in women being dominated in the home and subsequently accepting this domination and positioning through their social relationships (Beaumont, 2017). Additionally, regarding symbolic violence and transgressing symbolic identities, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 170) propose that gender is classified through 'gender domination' that is "the paradigmatic form of symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 170).

Consequently, from a Marxist Feminist viewpoint, women are oppressed through capitalism and the systems that it produces. Therefore, for women to be freed from the capitalist structure would require challenging the way women are regarded and treated as property with their labour as often unpaid and unappreciated (Scott, 2014). This is also explored by Benston (1969) who highlights the oppression of women in a capitalist society and argues that a transformation of capitalism would be required for women to be integrated in terms of their labour. This argument is commonly referred to as the 'domestic labour debate' (Luxton & Armstrong, 1991). Through adopting a Marxist Feminist analysis, an insight and understanding can be gained into the oppression of women in a capitalist society. From the 1960s onwards, Marxist Feminists strived to address how carrying out caring and domestic roles within the home were inseparable and a fundamental part of production. Furthermore, it appeared that this moved beyond traditional Marxist theories that seemed dismissive of the work performed in the home by women and the importance of this work in society.

Marx and Engels (1967) illustrated through their writings 'The Communist Manifesto' and through Marx's (1859) work the key connections between oppression and capitalism. They exemplified through the term 'historical materialism' society is determined by the structure and systems within it constructed through influential institutions such as educational establishments and systems (e.g. social class) that serves in the interests of those members of society in positions of power. However, this may be beneficial for those in power but often at the expense of those who are not in a position of power such as the working classes. Snyder-Hall (2010) offers her thoughts about third wave feminism and how it pays attention

to gender and social justice. For example, assumed gender roles and stereotypes may be challenged as individual identity becomes a topical debate.

Marx and Engels (1965) describe the relationship between the 'mode' and 'means' of production and the 'relations' as interrelated. In addition to this, the interrelations between the mode of production and the relations of production changes and evolves over time. However, this is not without the tensions and resentment from the opposing classes. This struggle between the owners (capitalists or bourgeoisie) and workers (proletariat) signifies the divide between the relations of production. Thus, highlighting the inequality amongst those with the means of production and those workers who do not. Education can replicate the economic and social structures in society and in education (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) through capitalist structures (Bourdieu, 1986) that are replicated in the workplace. It is here that this positioning determines future opportunities (Willis, 1981) and restricts the means to progress both professionally and personally.

This section has considered the oppression of women from a Marxist Feminist perspective and critiques their consequential positioning in terms of their relations within the home and employment. In the next section, the challenges that an individual may encounter when attempting to step out from their traditional role and often assumed identity is explored further and may result in resistance on several levels including from within the home or society.

2.3 Challenges and chances, the implications of changing identities

Butler (2004, p. 3) claims “if I have an agency, it is opened by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose” and that this is “constituted by norms” and “dependent” on them. This illustrates that “agency always exists with a paradox” (Mannay & Morgan, 2013, p. 70) where by individuals are ‘gendered’ and ‘classed’ through for example, education and employment that continues into HE. Because of this, non-traditional students including mature women can find that the journey through university it too challenging to continue.

Throughout their journey, students may face a variety of barriers to learning in addition to changes in their identity. Lucey et al. (2003) describe this change as becoming a ‘border crosser’ that can lead the individual to experience conflict and anxiety considering their previously assumed expectations. This demonstrates that identity and aspirations are defined by an individual’s culture that is assumed, accepted and determined by for example their social class and gender. This explores how crossing traditional class and gender-based boundaries may result in the individual leaving behind their norms and values into another culture. This shift in their identity requires students entering the academic world to change their identity by reinventing themselves in some way.

In addition to the difficulties of changing or developing one’s identity, Mannay and Morgan (2013); Bamber, Galloway and Tett, (2006) recognise the emotional cost attached to returning to education. This is strengthened by Jones (2008) who outlines reasons why some non-traditional students including mature women do not complete their studies. This includes

financial issues, poor choice of course, poor social integration and individual circumstances. Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine (2003) suggest that there is great emphasis placed on non-traditional students who attempt to step out into HE to succeed. This transition and new expectations may place additional stresses on women to not only take on the expected role and responsibilities as a mother, caregiver and wife but to also meet the additional requirements of being a student.

A further discussion presented by Bamber and Tett, (1999) and Reay, Crozier and Clayton, (2010) is that the consequence of women venturing away from their traditional role and into HE can result in them feeling that their identity and assumed norms and values have been challenged or altered. Women may feel that by entering HE they are in some way altering their identity and breaking away from the expected class-based judgements about education (Reay et al., 2010; Warrington, 2005). This illustrates how some non-traditional students may find the increased pressures in addition to the changes in identity one reason why they prematurely end their studies. Mannay and Morgan (2013) reinforce this argument by explaining that non-traditional students have multiple obstacles to overcome. This highlights the struggles that non-traditional students face in terms of cultural issues and the influence that this has on how students perceive themselves and how they are judged by others.

The impact of shifting identities may leave students feeling alienated from their peers who may have been an earlier source of support in other areas of their lives. Consequently, the 'cost' of studying may be on several levels including emotionally due to losing networks of friends and family alongside the personal and financial implications of returning to education.

These forces can enable students to enter education by providing support and motivations but can also hinder students educational journey if it conflicts with their expected social, relational and cultural norms (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009).

To summarise, mature women students may enter university with the idea of “new beginning” or with the hope of “being someone else, somewhere else” (Mannay & Morgan, 2013, p. 69) but this can cause additional tension (Reay et al., 2009), strains and changes in their relationships with others. Britton and Baxter (2001) study identified that this is particularly evident within the working classes and female students who experience greater difficulties than middle-class or male students. This demonstrates that relationships are a vital part of the progress and attainments of mature women students that can either help or hinder their studies. For some women, this may enable them to embark on a course of study if the relations are supportive but for other this may be one of the reasons that they opt out of education and end their studies. In the subsequent section, the relationships with others is developed further by considering the effect of social capital that is examined in addition to the impact of networks and relations.

2.4 Social capital

The effect of relationships and support is debated by Riddell, Baron and Wilson, (1999, p. 55) who define social capital as “the network of social and community relations that underpin people’s ability to engage in education, training and work and sustain a healthy civic community”. Furthermore, the idea of social capital (Hughes, 2002) has been a fundamental

concept to economic philosophies and this is viewed as one of the main flaws of this theory in relation to rational choice. For example, Coleman's (1988) earlier work outlines the importance of social capital that is transformed into human capital as in for example the instance of academic achievement that is influenced by family relations and inter family relations. It is here that specific emphasis is on the role of the family through engagement with their children and time spent at home when parents invest their time directly through their contact.

However, Becker's (1993, p. 9-10) later work on social relations and human capital and its implications demonstrates that due to for example the changing dimensions of the family, introduction of legislation and rise in divorce rates an increase in the service sector has brought higher levels of participation of women into the workforce. Prior to this, Becker (1993, p. 9) argues that the assumed "gender gap" was evident because women were more likely to be employed in part-time positions or have breaks in their career to have children. He claims that this resulted in less investment in the areas of training, education and skilled based incentives that may have improved earning and job skills. Therefore, the improvement of incomes and occupations of women are evident in many western countries and is particularly acknowledged in the United States. Because of these developments, family relations and the construct of the family have inevitably changed, and the traditional role of the wife, mother and homemaker has been challenged (Becker, 1993, p. 17).

However, one previous example of educational policy linked to rational choice and social capital may be seen in Ball and Gewirtz's (1997) research that focused on how single-sexed

schools for girls take account of the market and respond through the choices made by the girls and their parents. Although the parents in the study make some choices based on current market trends, it is evident that their judgements are framed on their educational experiences and not necessarily coincident with market theorists. This is represented by Ball and Gewirtz (1997, p. 219) comments that “both making choices and choices made is far from the rational calculus conjured by some market theorists”.

Brine (1999, p. 2) suggests that working-class women and men are prevented by a “class ceiling” that prevents them from progressing in education. For example, by analysing European educational policy she states that working-class women and men are viewed as low educated. Therefore, if education is deemed as a way out of poverty, there are limited opportunities available for individuals with low-level or limited qualifications and because of this they are often perceived as a low paid and low skilled workforce. Brine (1999) examines the material inequalities that remain relevant in state based educational policy-based initiatives. This highlights two distinctive forms of inequality. Firstly, how it is important to consider the formal equality concerned with the political and legal rights of individuals. Secondly, it examines the material inequalities that are prevalent such as financial inequalities.

To review, this demonstrates that women often have limited choices and opportunities when embarking on their HE journeys. One example when this perspective may be realised is through the division of labour that can restrict a woman’s choices regarding taking on

additional tasks such as studying. This point is explored in greater depth in the following section and the main areas considered include patriarchal culture and oppression.

2.5 Division of labour

In terms of choice within the labour market, Hughes (2002) argues that women take account of the domestic responsibilities that they have and subsequently take employment comprising of less hours or that is less demanding considering the additional work that they complete at home. This is supported by Gardiner's (1997, p. 49) comments that suggest that "gender differences in employment patterns are explained because of the cumulative effects of men and women individually and in the household units responding to rationally to the way the market signals the comparative advantage in the different spheres of production".

Through a Marxist perspective, Barrett (2014) explains how the woman is responsible for providing unpaid labour in the home and the man subsequently profits from working for his paid labour outside the home. Costa (1972, cited in Delphy and Leonard, 1992) illustrates the benefits that this relationship has in terms of supporting capitalism but possibly at the detriment of women. For example, by providing unpaid labour and fulfilling any caring responsibilities the woman is still enabling the capitalist structures and ideals (Barrett, 2014).

In addition to this, they are also contributing to not only a capitalist structure but also upholding the patriarchal organisation that presents man as having control via his labour power over the woman and family overall (Hartmann, 1982). Irigaray (1997) also explores this

in her work 'Women on the market' and refers to Marxism when she illustrates how women are exchanged similarly to a commodity in society based on their 'exchange value'. Martin (2003) examines Irigaray's work and highlights how she strived for democracy and equality for women. This is pertinent to my study as it challenges the traditional role of women from being viewed as a service provider in the home towards a fairer position that is comparative to men. However, Irigaray's (1996) work explores a move from an analysis of patriarchy towards encompassing an objective position that explores the possibility for a link between the two sexes. She does not dismiss the importance of the fight for equality but proposes to move beyond this by asking how women and men can form relationships that can be maintained without one being objectified by the other. Irigaray uses Hegel's work as a basis to propose that we must explore how individuals can live their lives together without being viewed as mere property but with a firm foundation of personal relations considering sexual differences.

Butler (1990) refers to De Beauvoir's argument that through patriarchal oppression men are perceived as being masculine and have a categorisation which is dismissive of women whose position is 'other' to that. Butler's (1990) notion of women as 'other' is an important point and can be explained as exemplifying the marked disparities between men and women. This shows that Butler proposes that women can't be categorised as simply a negation as other, hence the masculine subject as they are distinct. This moves beyond a dual understanding of what Butler notes, as a binary conflict and illustrates how these categories are shaped by features such as ethnicity, class and gender. The classification of 'woman' and 'women' is

problematic in the sense that they are founded on universally defined patriarchal stances constructed to oppress women.

Hartmann (1982) states that through this patriarchal system men could 'learn' the hierarchal structure and practices thus, through utilising a capitalist system could use this in their advantage and separate work considering their own best interests. Hartmann (1982) presents a dualism between capitalism and patriarchy that is strengthened by "women's continuing subordination in Western society" that is due to "men's exploitation of women's domestic labour" (Delphy & Leonard, 1992, p. 35). To conclude, this presents the idea that women's domestic labour is primarily beneficial to men through their "oppression" that may also be "indirectly beneficial to capitalism".

Young (1990, p. 75) outlines patriarchy as a system of oppression that is pervasive in most societies and captures the limitations in the subsequent extract;

Patriarchal society confines women to immanence. Immanence designates being an object, a thing with an already defined nature lined up within a general category of things with the same nature. Femininity is an essence, a set of general attitudes that define class, that restricts women to immanence and being defined as the Other.

Consequently, this oppresses women and restricts them to live in a "sexist society" where they "learn to live" confined by the "patriarchal culture" that shapes their lives. This male-controlled situation is clearly documented by Young (1990) in the following excerpt.

Patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified. As lived bodies, we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs

to us, a world that constituted by our own intentions and projections (Young, 1990, p. 153).

Young (1990) recognises that there are some women in modern society who appear to be an exception to this viewpoint, and she explains that this is because of events and opportunities that may have materialised unintentionally or by a stroke of luck. However, this trend does not seem to be represented in the workplace (Waldfoegel, 1998).

However, even today there is considerable disparity between the wages that men are paid compared with women irrespective of legislation that has been in place such as the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. Moreover, a report, by the University of Warwick's Institute for Employment for the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) (2013/14) based on graduate earnings in 2012, illustrated a continued gender pay gap with female graduates earning £8000 less than their male equals. This ongoing issue is highlighted by current government legislation to tackle gender inequalities including the Equality Act 2010 in relation to paid employment and the evidence that illustrates how despite legislation employers continue not to adhere to this. The Government Equalities Office (2011, p. 1) reports that "legislative measures to promote equal pay" highlights how it is estimated that there are "28,000 claims per year in employment tribunals" due to concerns of unequal treatment of employees.

Graduate labour market statistics for 2016, projected that women working on a full-time basis were typically paid less than their male colleagues. Furthermore, the gap regarding part-time work is considerably greater than the difference between women and men. This illustrated

the gender divide between the earnings of women and their male colleagues in similar roles. Therefore, this portrays an ongoing divide between equality of pay for men and women.

To contextualise, it is useful to understand the policy and legislation that has shaped the current practices including the historical legislative reforms that have underpinned changes in society based on inequalities between men and women. To summarise, the Equal Opportunities Commission (ECO) was established from the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) to promote equality and tackle forms of sex discrimination (Gregory, 1987). The Equal Pay Act 1970 principally advocated that under the Act an employee has equal entitlement to equal pay for work that is comparable to their male co-workers. One of the main reasons that the Act was introduced was to address differences between the wages paid between men and women. This was a response to ongoing inequalities and exemplified by protests such as the sewing machinists strike towards their employer Ford in 1968 (Dickens, 2006). More recent examples of pay inequalities has been illustrated by an alleged 9.3 % gender pay gap between the BBC and their female employees. This has resulted in changes in how this organisation conducts and publishes personnel salaries (BBC, 2017).

Additionally, the introduction of the Equality Act 2006 set the foundations for the subsequent Equality Act 2010 that aimed to promote parity irrespective of a person's race, beliefs (religious or otherwise), gender and sex, disability or age and influenced anti-discrimination legislation. The Equality Act 2010 replaced earlier pieces of legislation including the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and Equal Pay Act 1970 by trying to unify anti-discrimination law and make simpler guidance for all stakeholders including employers and employees (Wadham, Robinson & Ruebain, 2010). However, considering the earlier findings of the report by the

University of Warwick's Institute for Employment for the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU) (2013/14) that emphasised the stark differences between the two groups, this appears to be an ongoing area for development.

To recapitulate, considering the literature and legislation reviewed in this section, regardless of initiatives and policies introduced to date, there seems to be continuing discrepancies amongst aspects such as earnings and the way that women are treated in comparison to men. This may be attributed to wider issues of inequalities and the following section will address issues such as male dominance and power contextualised by the positioning of women and considering their sexuality and portrayal in society.

2.6 Power, dominance and being dominated

Fuss's (2013) work discusses power relationships and proposes that societal structures are predominantly patriarchal and that women have been marginalised due to their biological and gender differences. Because of this, they have had restricted opportunities (Walker, 1995) and experiences attributable to other influences. Foucault (1980) suggests that there is a hierarchal structure in western societies today based on sexual value and that knowledge and power are interlinked. Additionally, they underpin one another, therefore in terms of sexuality, this determines what is conventional and accepted in society. Walby (1990) and Young (1990) argue that this is due to patriarchy that is defined as a system of social structures whereby men can oppress, exploit and dominate women.

This is strengthened by earlier viewpoints such as Brownmillar (1976) who illustrates that this male dominance is a form of sexual control based on sexuality that is in the interest of men. One example offered by Brownmillar (1976) is in the instance of rape that highlights the sexual violence of men over women. Connell (2000, p. 22) builds upon this point and states that there are several ways that men “predominate across the spectrum of violence” that include physical and emotional. Biological differences are one explanation that Firestone (1971) presents that classifies women because women have reproductive capabilities whereas men have dominance over women’s bodies and therefore inequalities exist based on this point. Moreover, Chodorow (1978) explores the consequence of women’s mothering and how it contributes to what she terms as ‘sexual asymmetry’. Additionally, Millet (1977) suggests that radical feminism highlights how the family unit is a means to control and govern women through patriarchy and it is here that male dominance and a display of power is at its greatest.

Furthermore, in relation to power, Sawicki (1991) utilises a model of thought based on Foucault, Morris and Patton’s (1979) idea that power is not confined to a “class or state” but is exercised at a “microcosmic” level (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2005, p. 17). It is here that the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed (Foucault, 1979) is transferred through “social relations”. Sawicki (1991, p. 21) moves beyond this model and the concept of power as a commodity but proposes that one must consider “how subjects are constituted by power relations” and how this can act as not only an oppressive force but also as a rewarding aspect that is dependent upon how “discourses” are developed. This is supported by Foucault et al. (1979, p. 101) who states that “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power;

it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it". Likewise, Foucault et al. (1979) explores the idea that there is a positive way in which to challenge power through the actions of resistance that is through a continuous struggle. The implications of these points are that through Swaicki's notion of subjects being constituted by power relations relates to Young's (1990) views on Patriarchy as women are oppressed through societal structures and norms (Walker, 1995). This shows that women may attempt to break free from these restrictions but remain affected in many areas of their lives from in the home to wider roles in society including the workplace. This limits their choices and illustrates their distinctness as 'other' (Butler, 1990).

During the 1990s David, 2015; Sidler, 1997; Pilcher and Whelehan (2005, p. 118) highlight what is described as a new wave of feminism that stresses a more male orientated and power ridden approach to success that is characterised by a "competitive" and "meritocratic power". David (2015), a self-proclaimed Second-Wave Feminist, illustrated that over the last 50 years there have been differing opinions amongst academics on gender and what constitutes the liberation of women and gender equality. Walter (1998, p. 168) argues that this was challenged by iconic female figures such as Margaret Thatcher who illustrated a "growing power" of women who appeared to have a greater presence in society. This questions the extent that women like Margret Thatcher have on representing a new feminism. Furthermore, Third Wave Feminists like Walker (1995) strive for freedom, equality, justice and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970) for all people by focusing on gender-related issues. This could be misinterpreted in women's politics by certain figures being viewed as iconic for their

impact on politics rather than their achievements in overcoming oppressive issues as a woman.

Through the idea of 'individualism' (Daddow, 2013; Atkinson, Roberts & Savage, 2013) symbolised through individuals such as Margaret Thatcher who demonstrated power as a privilege and Walter (1998, p. 175) highlights that figures such as these "normalised female success". This point is demonstrated by Wilkinson (1993, p. 31) who argued that "she did not shy away from showing how much she loved power, and in turn she made it legitimate for us to love it too". This may suggest that women can be powerful and obtain power and be deemed to be in a powerful position in society because they have the qualities to assume power in their own right. Pilcher and Whelehan (2005, p. 119) propose that these options suggest that women have returned to a "more liberal image of power as monolithic". They also stress that traditional viewpoints have been replaced and this is shown by Wolf's (1993) introduction of the idea of 'power groups' of women who similarly to a patriarchal dominated structure, mediate power between individual members of the group.

Wolf (1993, p. 314) outlines this form of resistance and states that although "women usually lack money...they often have access to one thing that is increasingly valuable in today's economy: information" thus, emphasising the benefits of this arrangement. However, although Wolf (1993) identifies some of the strengths of a more liberal image of women and power in the 1990s, she also highlights how power is traditionally exercised within the household. This includes the way in which tasks are divided within the family home and suggests that women are responsible for fulfilling most domestic chores within it. This

proposes that this separation is based on the 'sexual division' in the family unit where the woman is 'gendered' based on their sex which results in women being viewed as inferior to the man who is traditionally expected to be the one who is financially able to provide for the family.

2.7 Education and gender bias

De Beauvoir first published the *Second Sex* in the 1940s and referred to the idea of gender followed by writers such as Oakley (1972) whose text *Sex, Gender and Society* typifies the biological sex differences in relation to the way in which this informs the behaviours that are then allocated to males and females to what it is interpreted to be known as masculinity and femininity. Oakley (1972, p. 192) explores how gender is constructed and relates to westernised cultures that stress the importance for maintaining this organisation to keep "social efficiency". This belief reiterates the stereotypical gender-based roles and expects the women to perform the role as housewife and mother (Walker, 1995). Moreover, through this analysis men are in a more favourable position that is strengthened by social norms (Walker, 1995) reinforcing the advantageous hierarchical position of masculinity over femininity (Coppock & Haydon, 2014).

One of the most radical interpretations of gender is offered by (Butler, 1990, p. ix) who adopts a Foucauldian model to suggest that every classification of identity is the "effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin". This point is explored further by Butler (1990, p. 6) who states that the "sex/gender distinction suggests a

radical discontinuity between the sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders". This exacerbates the problematic nature of gender and non-conformity that may challenge traditional gender categories such as heterosexuality, thus unsettling the equilibrium in society. The gendering (Coppock & Haydon, 2014) of individuals is often demonstrated by the dissimilarities between masculinity and femininity and even some early age infants may typically be dressed in either blue or pink to represent their gender distinctions. Furthermore, Davies (1996) suggests that gender is an ever changing and continuous process that is 'engaged' in the processes in the social order.

De Beauvoir (1972, p. 295) describes and separates the relationship between sex and gender through the analogy that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". Gender to a large degree shapes many aspects of our everyday lives (Coppock & Haydon, 2014, Cranny-Francis, Waring, Stavropoulos & Kirkby, 2003) and our gender regulates how we are categorised and recorded on vital documentation such as a birth certificate, driving licence and passport. This demonstrates how society defines and organises individuals based on their assigned gender. Rubin, Provenzano and Luria (1974) highlighted how through the 'sex/gender' system individuals are classified through gender based on their biological and anatomical makeup. Oakley (1985) demonstrates how gender is a socially constructed concept of sex outlined below;

'Sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender', however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Oakley, 1985, p. 16).

However, biological and gender differences are contested constructs (Lorber, 1994) and Fish (2006) presents that this is problematic today.

This is important to contemplate in relation to women returning to education as liberal feminism derived from the 18th and 19th Century and attempted to challenge the accessibility of education and employment that should be based purely on the meritocracy and the capabilities of women (Fuss, 2013). Therefore, proposing that women should not be excluded or have limited participatory opportunities in society including any social and political prospects due to their sex. Although it is essential to consider key liberal feminist thinkers such as Wollstonecraft (1792), it is equally important to recognise the criticisms presented by others. For example, Smith (1987) comments on how this way of thinking appears to be somewhat dated in adopting a position that expects women to be more like men in their historical, social and political context. Macaulay's (1970) earlier writings 'Letters on Education', and similarly to Wollstonecraft (1792) who was a radical, were aware of the revolution taking place and identified that women perceived flaws were not due to a biological make up or natural occurrence but were a result of "mis-education" (Walters, 2005, p. 30). Additionally, she dismissed the idea that women were solely "the mere property of men" (Macaulay, 1970) holding no power or sense of independence.

Based on this, radical feminists like Millet (1990) cited in Gore (2003) and Eisenstein (1984) argue that this is a more dated viewpoint that does not contest the very source and systems of oppression that women face. To explore radical feminism further, it presents the idea that women's oppression is rooted from their biological makeup, role and function in the

reproductive process. For example, sex-based roles including childbirth alongside the expectation that the woman must fulfil the role of child rearing as the primary care giver are believed to oppress women. This belief is fixed on specific relationships where women are controlled by a patriarchal dominance of men (Smith, 1987).

In this instance, through the pressures placed on women, gender reiterates the tasks that they are expected to fulfil. Evans (1995, p. 109) stated that early social feminists believed that to create equality “it demanded capitalism’s overthrow; the expropriation of the property-holders, the abolition of private property, and the concomitant emancipation of the proletariat; a necessary preliminary to the liberation of women”. Through a Marxist framework, Hartmann (1981) noted that it was a supposition that capitalism would encourage women to enter the labour market and therefore end the sex-based division of labour. Additionally, Marxist feminists have strived for both economic and political equality. The continued need for equality is evidenced by Bradley (2016) who highlights the gap between the richer and poorer groups in British society that is not only prevalent in Britain but throughout the rest of the world.

One explanation provided by Bradley (2016) is that there has not been sufficient focus on the material inequalities and other socially differentiated aspects such as social class and gender. These are described by Bradley (2016) as ‘fractured identities’ including internal fragmentation, external fragmentation, impact of social change and increased individualism. One example of internal fragmentation may be within specific groups such as social classes. Further external fragmentations are evident, such as gender, alongside individual and wider

social changes. Fraiser (1995, p. 88) addresses the inextricably linked relationship between cultural and material inequalities and how this is responsible for restricted low educational and employment opportunities amongst other things. Frasier (1995) recommends that “readdressing gender injustice requires changing both political economy culture” by destructing the “circle of economic and cultural subordination”.

2.8 Gender and gendered education

The idea of gendering is not only within women’s roles, responsibilities and employment but is also evident in their education from an early age. Cranny-Frances et al. (2003) demonstrate the distinctive and dominant “bodies of knowledge” that are influential across “all Western systems of education, at all levels” (Cranny-Frances et al. 2003, p. 182). They suggest that this form of ‘gendering’ within educational systems affects the way in which the sexes are taught, divided and more generally schooled. For example, they emphasise a clear distinction in the practices within schools and how they operate such as the disciplining of pupils and divisions in terms of academic subjects. Therefore, these systems shape the gendered constructs (Coppock & Haydon, 2014) based on their ideals regarding masculinity and femininity.

This perspective is strengthened by Walkerdine (1990) who highlights that this process begins at a very early age within a child’s educational journey when they initially enter the classroom and consequently continues throughout their educational experiences. Also, one criticism proposed in the introduction of compulsory schooling for girls is that the system aimed to replicate the gendered domestic roles that would be required of girls in adulthood in the

family home (Dyhouse, 1981). For example, Dyhouse (1981) and Purvis (1995) are both feminist historians who suggest that in addition to focusing on preparing women to fulfil domestic tasks, it also attempted to portray middle-class values upon working-class children. This accentuates the importance of having a male head of the household and provider and the prominence of the female to fulfil the requirements in the role of the wife and mother who is financially dependent upon him.

The preceding discussion about identity including ideas around changing identities, community and cultural influences and how identities are re-shaped and reformed leads towards an examination of additional themes. These include the extent and importance of networks of support, choice and travel, the journey towards change, aspirations and expectations, intersectionality and widening participation initiatives.

Hanisch (2006, p. 1-3) argues that “women are messed over, not messed up!” through what she describes as “male supremacy”. Moreover, she proposes that perceived “personal problems” that women experience such as “sex, appearance, and abortion” should be debated in the “public arena”. Hanisch claims that although women’s oppression in the home and workplace is beginning to be recognised in some respects, other areas such as childcare responsibilities or helping with domestic tasks are still regarded as a woman’s ‘personal issue’. This is particularly relevant to my research as all five women participating in the study manage other demands alongside their studies and may struggle or feel oppressed by their situations.

Subsequent to this, the next section entitled 'Networks of support' will explore the role of support systems on women in HE and the impact that an established support network may have. In contrast to this, the impact of a lack of support will also be considered to illustrate the challenges that women may encounter without this provision.

2.9 Networks of support

It is useful to discuss how education is defined to understand the journey that individuals take to learn and achieve a qualification at university. For example, Knowles, Holon and Swanson, (2005, p. 10) claim that "education is an activity undertaken or initiated by one or more agents that is designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skill, and attitudes of individuals, groups, or communities". Whereas, learning is more of a personal change that occurs in the person that enables them to change both personally and socially. This may be of significance to the educational experiences of women in this research study who may have completely changed their lives due to learning new things, developing as a person and having the opportunity to meet new people.

Knowles et al. (2005, p. 11) stress that the impact of change is a crucial aspect of learning and this demonstrates that learning has happened and because of this changed the person who has been involved in the "learning process" (Crow & Crow, 1963, p. 1). This point is supported by Haggard (1963, p. 20) who noted that "there is a remarkable agreement upon the definition of learning as being reflected in a change in behaviour as the result of experience". This is applicable to this thesis as all the women involved in the research are participating in the learning process irrespective of the subject area in which their course of study is situated.

Additionally, learning may be motivated by the desire to achieve, develop and gain some form of academic recognition for their work.

Although there are many complexities regarding learning theories and definitions of learning and education, it may be beneficial to assume that “education emphasises the educator, whereas learning emphasises the person in whom change occurs or is expected to occur” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 16). Maslow (1970) argues that through this change an individual can develop in some way and fulfil their potential. However, it is imperative to be aware that certain groups of individuals are at a disadvantage even before the point of entry into university life and many do not feel that they can progress onto a higher level of study from their college, access course or other studies. Reay, Miriam, and Ball, (2005) explain that this is based on a combination of reasons that act as a deterrent to them moving into HE. This point is captured below;

A whole range of factors including prior qualifications, earlier educational experiences and levels of confidence may be implicated, but equally salient seems to be these women’s ability to immerse themselves in their studies until all of their domestic and child care responsibilities have been discharged (Reay et al., 2005, p. 91).

This argument demonstrates that circumstances play a central part in determining whether individuals feel that they have the means to enter HE and accomplish their studies whilst juggling other obligations. In addition to this, being able to dedicate the time to study and complete the work required is also a concern for some working-class students. Archer and Hutchings (2001, p. 561) reported that their participants were uncertain about the transition to university and the expectations that this would bring and attempted to balance the positive

and negative aspects of undertaking a course at university before committing themselves. They highlighted that for many, “applying and getting to university was talked about as an uncertainty (risky) process which would cost considerable time” (Archer & Hutchings, 2001, p. 561). Therefore, working-class students are cautious of constraints such as financial restraints, time management and the ability to manage these elements against their desire to learn. Overall, they reported being anxious about the impact that this may have on their work, family and general home life this may emphasise the class and gender issues that are applicable to women returning to education.

Nevertheless, what was understood as the concept of “husband’s support” varied across each individual’s account but was generally regarded as providing “approval” and “encouragement” (Berkove, 1979, p. 451). This also implied that they generally supported their wife with their education in various ways including emotional and practical support. Similarly, a later report presented by Thacker and Novak (1991) identified the impact of support and how a range of stresses impacted women aged 35-64 who have re-entered education. This explored how they had learnt to adapt to university life irrespective of the many challenges faced. Hendry and Farley (2006) consider the difficulties of returning to university to study and how learning at home can be an isolating experience.

Likewise, Henry and Farley, (2004, p. 48) recognise the challenges faced by mature students returning to education including being presented with ‘new technologies’ and teaching styles. This demonstrates that it can be problematic at times for students to grasp these advancements and meet the demands of being a student again later in their life cycle.

Therefore, it is essential that they are provided with adequate opportunities to seek guidance and support. This captures that not only is it useful to have a good network of support in the home, from family members or a partner but that it is equally vital that support can be accessed when required through their place of study. However, Edwards (1993, p. 144) found that women experienced challenges to returning to study in their community and educational setting as they encountered difficulties as “...other mothers did not do the sort of thing they were doing”. Therefore, women are stepping away from their peers and community into an environment where they are not fully integrated or accepted.

Thacker and Novak’s (1991) study was conducted by comparing two distinctive groups of women, including women who had a family consisting of younger children compared to other women who had older children. This concluded that the groups had very different motivational factors, choices, networks of support and stresses and challenges based on their individual situations. This is demonstrated further by Gouthro’s (2006, p. 11) explanation;

Women often enter into education with the conflicting goals of wanting to attain a sense of independence and develop a sense of identity that is not determined by relationships with others (i.e. as a wife or mother) without rejecting the importance of these roles in their lives.

Pascall and Cox’s (1993) found that support and encouragement inspired students to return to HE as their husbands provided not only emotional support but secured them financial stability whilst studying. However, the role of the husband in the experiences of women was not always an enabling factor as two respondents stated that it was only following a divorce did they feel able to break free from their husbands control and embark on a course of study. There may be additional stresses on the women and her partner and family due to the

increased financial pressures (Cox & Ebbers, 2010) and competing demands (Stone, 2008). Additionally, there is a risk associated with returning to HE as this may strain relationships and social and family networks (Brine & Waller, 2004; Stone & O'Shea, 2013) and although the husband may be supportive it may also have an impact on their marriage. Therefore, considering Pascall and Cox (1991) work and reinforced by Morgan's (1981, p. 39) views, raises questions surrounding the need for approval to study from a husband. Hence, proving that permission must be sought and granted from a women's husband before any support is given.

Berkove (1979) and Stone (2008) recognised that there are tensions within the family unit when a woman returns to education and tries to manage their studies alongside fulfilling other responsibilities in the home. For example, whilst women continue to be able to do these tasks successfully, it often has a detrimental impact on their education. Additionally, being able to manage the competing demands of learning is one of the "key mediators" of returning to HE (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey, 2008, p. 623). Moreover, Berkove (1979) highlights how receiving support from their husbands is imperative as a woman may have numerous roles and responsibilities such as being a carer for her family, mother, wife, employee and student.

In summary, this demonstrates that a woman's contemplations include an array of factors and requirements that must be considered and deemed as doable before they feel that they can commit to their studies. Furthermore, this interlinks with the next section that discusses the decisions that a woman makes including their course and location of their educational

establishment that are both factors that appear to be notable issues for women returning to education.

2.10 *Choice and travel*

Choice and location has already been highlighted as a decisive factor for students returning to HE. For example, due to the financial constraints that they encounter many students do not consider institutions that would require them leaving the family home or travelling at distance due to the cost implications (Reay et al., 2005). In relation to mature working-class students, this is particularly applicable and overwhelming due to their financial stresses, caring responsibilities and other commitments. The relationship that they have with others such as their family and friends is particularly affected as they do not have the time for socialising. Reay et al. (2005, p. 90) highlight that working-class students not only experience financial issues, they also suffer from “time poverty” that is referred to as having less free time to socialise. Through Reay et al. (2005, p. 90) study this was evidenced by mature working-class students stating that they did not have a great deal of time for either themselves or others.

This form of ‘time poverty’ is influenced by many aspects in their lives such as their student lifestyle, relationships and the ability to take time out for themselves. Reay et al.’s (2005, p. 91) argue that this resulted in many mature working-class students who were also mothers expressing feelings of guilt and anxiety in their accounts. This demonstrates the complexity of mature working-class mothers who need to evaluate their choices alongside the

implications of their decisions on others such as their dependents. This reasoning contrasts with more privileged students who may have greater financial security and less obligations.

As outlined in this section, the pressures of travelling to university alongside the challenges of having the time to manage other responsibilities are clearly exemplified in the literature. Even though the practical demands and expectations of returning to education may be difficult for some mature students to manage, the more emotional and mental issues may prove to be equally testing. Based on these points, the subsequent section will examine the challenges faced when individuals attempt to change their situations and roles within the home and wider society by shifting their identity and transgressing traditional gender and class boundaries.

2.11 *The journey towards change*

Aspirations can be a crucial factor in evoking change and Pascall and Cox (1993, p. 75) capture how their female respondents see education as the only way to escape their current circumstances. Their respondents were sacrificing aspects such as secure employment, familiarity of routines and stability. They felt that they did not have the necessary qualifications and wanted to improve their situation and potential careers. Through the interviews conducted it became evident that some of the respondents felt that they had not had adequate opportunities in their previous educational experiences. Consequently, they believed they had in some way missed out. One explanation for this suggested by Edwards, (1997) and Edwards, Armstrong and Miller, (2001) about lifelong learning is that that some

individuals experience marginalisation, inequalities and social inclusion that can affect their chances of engaging in the learning process.

Pascall and Cox, (1993, p. 76) reported that many of the women had reflected on their educational experiences and the impact of significant events such as marriage, childbirth and illness as a constraint on their identity and educational opportunities. This acquired identity as learner was a new identity as “being a housewife failed to perform that function”. Recalling Willis’ (1977) work, individuals did not always perceive education as important or achievable and therefore did not feel that they fully engaged in the learning process. There were other factors such as financial restraints that had affected their education and characteristics such as these played a significant factor in their journey, causing interruptions in their studies or preventing them from continuing to HE.

For women, there are differences between their educational experiences and their male counterparts who did not experience the same challenges, changes to identity and numerous roles (Hinton-Smith’s, 2009). Subsequently, the respondents were also confronted with differences when they decided to return to education to begin their studies and Pascall and Cox (1993, p. 75) stated that they “were stepping out of line when they compared themselves with colleagues or housewives” as this was not expected of them. This was based on perceived expectations and the fact that they were female (O’Shea, 2015). Moreover, this was predominantly based on beliefs about their social class (Bourdieu, 1990). Overall, there were a variety of reasons why women decide to return to HE, ranging from a ‘second chance’ (Giles, 1990), hoping to advance their careers to increasing their incoming and improve job

prospects. However, Pascall and Cox's, (1993, p. 76) study illustrated the strong desire that these respondents had to escape married life. Overall, there appeared to be a theme of monotony and dissatisfaction about their situations and the expected functions that they had in the home upheld by the norms of society at that time.

Marxist and socialist feminists critique the function of capitalism and the way women are viewed as a commodity or property. Putnam Tong (1998) highlights how 'classism' fundamentally shapes the oppression faced by women as the class and economic systems repress women and ultimately are beneficial and in the primary interest of men. Millet (1977) identifies the systematic oppression of women that affects every part of society. For example, the patriarchal role of the man over the women influences and replicates the systems in society. Millet (1977) suggests that in contemporary society these patriarchal relationships are supported by the continual issues of violence and more specifically sexual violence such as rape. Likewise, the perceived functions of women in society uphold patriarchy through 'socialisation' that supports patriarchal foundations including the obligations regarding domestic roles within the family (Slattery, 2003).

Millet (1977) states that historically patriarchal control allowed the man ownership of his wife and children. She demonstrates that a woman is the property of the man to be utilised as best he sees fit. Millet (1977) and Slattery (2003) suggest power is central to exerting 'sexual domination' that is permitted by the 'socialisation' of men over women. For instance, societal norms and expectations and the impact of accessibility and aspirations of women and inequalities in education appear to still be apparent in academic works including Reay (2006);

Abercrombe (2004) and highlighted in educational reports such as *Gender in Education: the evidence on pupils in England* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). However, many feminist researchers such as Ezzy (2002) critique the validity of research and stress that there is a need to rethink the research process due to the male dominated research theories that may 'oppress' and have a detrimental impact on the representation of women. For example, Ezzy (2002, p. 23) challenges a traditional masculine stance and argues that "if women's experience is analysed using only theories and observations from the standpoint of men, the resulting theories oppress women". Therefore, from a feminist perspective "gender" is "a category of experience" (Ezzy, 2002, p. 43).

However, Hughes (2005) illustrates the assumption that direct experiences of oppression is often viewed as a more relevant and true account of the challenges faced by women. Additionally, Hughes, (2005); Narayan, (1998) suggests that experience is perceived as more valid in terms of the ability to understand oppression and social relationships. Hughes (2005, p. 159) critiques this standpoint and states that one of the issues of this viewpoint is that it "gives epistemic privilege to those who have direct insights and knowledge of the practices of their own contexts and those of their oppressors". Hughes (2005, p. 159) suggests this causes us to presume that "direct access to an experience is sufficient for political consciousness". In contrast to this, Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994, p. 30) argue that first-hand experience is not necessarily the most vital perspective required for understanding social reality. This is captured by the assumption that a person does not have to directly experience oppression or an occurrence to try to develop an understanding of it.

In relation to this study, although there may be similar perspectives on for example social class or experiences of returning to HE, it is vital that it is acknowledged that there are no assurances (Sudbury, 1998) that I will gain the 'truth' (Hughes, 2005). Subsequently, this point is demonstrated by Hartstock (1997) who argues that recording women's experiences does not enable the researcher to become knowledgeable of their participants but that a "standpoint" (Hughes, 1995, p. 161) and understanding may only become achievable through a "critical consciousness, reflexivity and struggle".

To summarise, researchers such as Hughes (2005) impose the need for an objective stance when conducting feminist research through adopting a "critical distance" (Hughes, 2005, p. 161) emphasized by Haraway's (1997, p. 1998-9) comments overleaf;

A standpoint is not an empiricist appeal to or by 'the oppressed' but a cognitive, psychological, and political tool for more adequate knowledge judged by nonessentialist, historically, contingent, standards of strong objectivity.

This demonstrates the need to consider the participants' accounts from their perspective of their experiences in the study in relation to HE. This must be in addition to all methodological issues alongside grounding the study in the existing body of literature. Acker (1994, p.158) states that educational research needs to acknowledge that women are a separate group to men and should recognise "the diversity of women and the dangers of generalization". Therefore, it is important to consider each woman's journey through their viewpoint and my study attempts to achieve this through capturing the women's experiences. However, O'Shea (2015) advises that women should not be categorised by their gender, but their caregiving roles and responsibilities should be considered. Based on this argument, it is imperative to

have a rounded understanding of the challenges women face and in the next section the oppression of women is explored in greater depth by considering the impact of 'intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1991) through a more multidimensional perspective.

2.12 A holistic approach

Crenshaw (1989) inventive notion of intersectionality and highlighted how women experience oppression in different ways and with varying degrees of impact. She explains that cultural characteristics of oppression are interconnected by 'intersectional' structures in society. These intersections include, race, ethnicity, gender and social class. Crenshaw (1989) identifies that women have issues that they are encounter, for example a black working-class woman may have experienced racism, sexism and discrimination based on their ethnicity, gender and social class. These elements are entwined and cannot be separated from one another.

Crenshaw's (1991) subsequent work presents three key categories based on issues experienced by women including 'structural intersectionality', 'political intersectionality' and 'representational intersectionality' (Crenshaw's (1991, p.1245). This illustrates differing structures of power and their relationship with women's lives in specific regard to black women. This explores how race needs to be considered through a feminist perspective. In addition, in the instance of perhaps inequality in the workplace that was previously explored in section 2.5 'Division of labour', it inevitably may offer a way to address and comprehend issues of discrimination. For example, intersecting factors including social class, race and

gender may capture interrelated discriminatory practices in the workplace. Although Crenshaw (1989) acknowledges that race, class and gender are not new ideas, are not new concepts, she proposes that to address inequalities and systemic oppression we must bring to the forefront the issues regarding movements against discrimination based on race and social class alongside feminist thinking. Therefore, she argues that the same principles must be universally applied across all aspects of inequalities.

In Crenshaw's research based on 'battered women's shelters' she observed that women from minority backgrounds experience 'structural intersectionality' that is concerned with the intersection of unequal social groups through the 'subordination' they experience. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1245-6) suggests that "where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge...intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles." This proposes that their experiences are different to white women where they are marginalised and "burdened" through "poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills". Crenshaw explains that this is a "consequence of gender and class oppression". This is relevant to my research as this illustrates how certain groups in society have better access to resources and support than others whereas others are confronted by greater barriers and vulnerabilities.

Intersectionality critiques feminism for being predominantly white and middle-class and does not reflect the experiences of black women (Crenshaw, 1989). This highlights that there are various other groups of women to consider and claims that mainstream feminism does not

hear the voices of minority groups and subsequently marginalises them. Therefore, interconnected categories need to be acknowledged to understand that identity is not singular but is made up of multifaceted layers that includes social, biological and cultural dimensions. This position is relevant to my study as the women have different backgrounds and circumstances. Therefore, intersectionality highlights that it is important to consider adopting a perspective that recognises the uniqueness of the women's experiences and does not merely surmise that their experiences and the challenges that they may face are necessarily the same (Davis, 2008).

McCall (2005) explores the impact of 'intersectionality' and identifies that a person's individualisms including social class and gender are important aspects on their experiences of returning to education. Furthermore, Acker (2006) examines two key feminist issues regarding intersectionality and the reproduction of inequalities such as race, gender and social class. For example, Crenshaw (1989) suggests that the impact of intersectionality may be detrimental to an individual's experience of HE and in specific relation to black women's experiences based on social divisions. Furthermore, these social divisions are often interconnected and due to this an individual may experience numerous oppressions. Therefore, a nuanced understanding of the intersecting elements of social inequalities is crucial to consider their relationship differences and similarities.

Nevertheless, writers such as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) advise against merely surmising that aspects such as race and gender are supplementary to social class. They propose that there is a marked difference in the various types of inequalities and because of this they

should be viewed as an 'addition' to social class. Therefore, Anthias (2001, p. 846) states class should be presented as one of three 'social divisions' alongside race and gender and explained that "class is not in fact an economic relation per se but a social relation which involves forms of social organization and cultural modes of expression related to production and consumption processes". Therefore, social class is frequently addressed in terms of the analysis of social divisions and the inequality of economic resources and through this structure individuals are assembled based on their "position in an economically-based hierarchy" (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004, p. 13).

To recall previous discussions, through a Marxist perspective, this is in terms of their classification regarding the means of production, such as a worker, and therefore contributing to the system with labour or as a more favourable position as a Capitalist, as the owner of the means of production. This idea is still regarded in many aspects in society today as a person's social class being dependent upon their occupational status and their financial situation or level of pay (Scott, 2014). Walby, Armstrong and Strid (2012) offer a further review of intersectionality by presenting six key arguments whereby they critique the distinct aspects of structural and political intersectionality. This is applicable to my research as it examines the inequalities including the impact of social class and how this interlinks with other 'mutual shaping' Walby et al., 2012, p.224) issues that are pertinent to gender theory.

Gutierrez and Hopkins, (2015) explore the interrelations between young people's characteristics and feminist characteristics including their mutually challenging issues such as inequalities and uneven relationships based on power. They examine these connections

through synthesising these aspects and investigating the contributions to this body of knowledge through a themed approach, this specifically critiques the continuing literature on gender, youth work and intersectionality. Subsequently, when examining 'queer youth', Mayo (2007) presents categories of identity that gives individuals a sense of identity contextualised by their race, gender and sexuality and demonstrates the importance of considering influential geographies amongst these groups of individuals.

To summarise, Garry (2011) intersectionality proposes a holistic understanding of the multi-layered and multifaceted lives that women have, and Crenshaw suggest that this is in specific relation to the lives of black women. However, whilst intersectionality is an important perspective to consider, as the five women participants in my study were all white, working class mature women from a similar demographic area the focus of my research was consequentially based on their specific oppressive issues such as gender and social class.

2.13 Widening participation initiatives in education

It is important to consider the developments of widening participation initiatives as I feel that is relevant to the women in my study as it highlights to some degree the steps that have been taken to address the inequalities in education. In terms of HE, this includes acknowledging the different needs and challenges faced by non-traditional students. However, it may also be argued that it is a meagre attempt to redress inequalities in HE. The next section of the literature review will discuss HE and widening participation contextualised by examples of previous attempts to address the challenges non-traditional students face when entering

university. Egerton and Halsey (1993) argue there have been three crucial changes within HE which includes an increase in the number of students entering HE.

However, although there has been a decrease in gender inequality, class inequalities continue to be present, 'class differentials' (Reay et al., 2005) still exist. This highlights that even though there have been considerable expansion, class disparities have been a constant issue (Gillon, 1999). This was shown in the 'Gender and Education Report' (2007, p. 4) that illustrates that "the social class attainment gap at Key Stage 4 (as measured by percentage point difference in attainment between those eligible and not eligible for free school meals) is three times as wide as the gender gap" and this demonstrates the significance of a student's social class. Additionally, this captures that at every point of the education class disparities are apparent. The drive to widen participation has been linked to the desire for social justice (Kettley, 2007) and legislation such as the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and the 2004 Higher Education Act have driven research based on the widening participation rates in HE through a predominantly political and sociological based approach.

One argument is that "current policies and practices have undermined the commitment to combat the social inequalities that are institutionalised and reproduced within the academic world" (Burke, 2002, p. 1). A further criticism is that previous research has been preoccupied with the concerns regarding widening participation and has focused on factors that have prevented students from accessing education. Kettley (2007, p. 334) argues that a more "holistic" approach must be taken to understand the relationship between "social characteristics, learning experiences and university careers". Furthermore, he argues that

initial research was linked to “accessibility” and states that this was “characterised by three distinct strands: the citizenship right to attend HE, the enumeration of students' and the exploration of student life”.

This standpoint is upheld by other critics who have argued that previous widening participation research had been not been particularly convincing (Ahier & Moore, 1999). However, the introduction of fees and student loans may have deterred working-class students (Callender & Jackson, 2004; Hesketh, 1999) from HE through concerns of the financial commitment this involves, including student debt. Woodrow and Yorke (2002) examine the participation of working-class students including the effectiveness of widening participation initiatives in overcoming barriers to learning. This was evident in ethnographic studies such as Hutchings and Archer (2001, p. 69) that demonstrated the issues faced by disadvantaged groups including prior achievement at secondary school, financial concerns, low aspirations and fixed views about university life.

To contextualise, David, Bathmaker and Crozier, (2009, p. 3-6) highlight that during the first part of the 21st century the current government introduced a series of steps to improve the position of the United Kingdom's workforce due to “local” and “global” changes in HE. This focused on the UK's ability to be competitive and have the competencies and skills in a global market through aiming to expand ‘equality’ and ‘fairness’ in a university structure that had moved from a ‘national’ to an “international” system. They suggest that there has been a drive to increase the number of individuals continuing with education post compulsory education. Widening participation initiatives that have been aimed at increasing the level of

participation of students to enter HE and enrol on a course of study from a range of socially diverse backgrounds including those who are viewed as “economically, educationally and socially disadvantaged”. This may be based on many factors including an individual’s “social class”, “ethnicity or race”, “age” and “gender”. These students form an “under-represented” group within HE and although there has been an array of initiatives including the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE’s) Aim Higher scheme to increase participation from these groups of students, many have been influenced by not only “individual identities” but “institutional circumstances”.

The focus on widening participation in HE has been a topic that has acted as a key policy area for numerous years and this has been to challenge inequalities and create a more equal and diverse education system that is inclusive of individuals from a variety of social groups. For example, from the 1960s it was predominantly white middle-class males (10% of 18-year olds) who continued into HE (David et al., 2009). This situation evoked changes within the HE system following the Robbins Committee Report 1963 when there was a ‘new wave’ of universities that aimed to implement what was referred to as a ‘binary policy’. This was in line with the changes that had been taking place in secondary education with the introduction of polytechnic institutions in the 1970s. This aimed to address a binary system and open HE to a wider group of students.

David et al. (2009) explain that it is here when ‘systematic inequalities’ were challenged, and new initiatives were embedded. However, the Department for Education (2017) do not concur with this position as it reports that there are marked differences between the earnings

of female and male graduates. Additionally, other factors such as gender and social class also appear to be influential in women's chances of attaining a competitive salary in line with their male colleagues possibly due to gaps in employment and "inactivity" (Department for Education, 2017, p. 18-19). Earlier initiatives have attempted to challenge inequalities in HE and one example of further change specifically focused on HE during the 1980s when the Conservative government introduced a widening participation initiative entitled- 'Higher education: meeting the challenge' (Cmnd, 114:1987) that specifically focused on increasing the levels of participation of mature female students. This was shortly followed by the changes in funding for HE which derived from the Education Reform Act 1988 and this was further developed in 1992 by the replacement of existing polytechnics and the 'binary policy' with the introduction of a further range of 'new' universities.

Irrespective of the government in office, throughout all the challenges and changes surrounding education, HE and participation levels in the United Kingdom, the need for statistical collection and analysis is constantly on the agenda. Subsequently, the classification and monitoring of this data was a contested area that was continuously under review exemplified from the 'Higher Education Initial Participation Rate, HEIPR' introduced to monitor the accessibility of HE to other examples such as the 'participation in higher education' (HERO, 2006) agenda that had an emphasis on the entry stage of HE. However, David et al. (2009, p. 10) critiques these approaches as not only the cohort of students being considered limited to first year undergraduate students but it did not reflect issues such as "equality" and "fairness" in terms of participation levels.

The principle aim of widening participation initiatives is to enable sections of the population to access HE through various programmes developed to promote inclusion. However, Kennedy (1997) advises that it is important that these initiatives are not primarily concerned with increasing the number of students attending university and being preoccupied with the competitive nature of attainment and league tables but that figures are inclusive of groups from all sectors of society. Additionally, Kennedy (1997, p. 7) emphasises that “making social cohesion a prominent goal of education” is vital and “has a powerful rationale in economic terms [and is] the centrality of human and social capital in economic success”.

One of the key transformations supported by the previous Labour government was to increase participation in HE and consequently transformed institutions that facilitate learning to a more diverse cohort of students. This consisted of changing the nature of HE through partnerships with other providers, such as colleges thus, addressing the perception that HE was achievable for disadvantaged groups (MacLeod & Major, 2002). Through encompassing various outreach projects such as Aim Higher (Clarke, 2003) relationships could be developed to encourage students from groups that were historically marginalised into HE. Consequently, it may have encouraged diversity in terms of age, ethnicity, gender and social class through greater representation from those of non-traditional groups. However, this expansion was not without its challenges such as the number of students completing their studies from lower socio-economic groups whose retention rates were significantly higher than their more affluent counterparts (Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

However, widening participation has subsequently challenged the traditional structures of HE (Thomas, 2005) and because of this received criticism from conservative supporters and writers such as Kallenbach (2003). However, the attempts to address social exclusion in the past were not only aimed to support individuals to overcome barriers to learning and establish links between HE providers and communities it was also to address wider societal problems at that time (Kennedy, 1997). One criticism of widening participation is that the value of attaining a HE qualification has in some sense devalued academic achievement due to the greater number of individuals entering HE and increased competitiveness in the labour market (Naidoo, 2003). Moreover, Kallenbach (2003) argues that through focussing on enabling specific groups to access HE it is at the detriment of other more traditionally privileged students including those from higher social classes.

However, Bourdieu (1990) illustrates how working-class students attempt to enter universities with a student cohort like their own social class that is predominantly from post 1992 universities that have an emphasis on widening participation (Sutton Trust, 2000). This shows that they want to be in HE with students who they perceive are 'people like us' (Bourdieu, 1990). This highlights how cultural capital is embedded in universities and is evidenced through the students, how they present themselves, including their attitudes and how they see themselves in relation to their right to study at HE (Reay et al., 2005).

In relation to equality, Bowles and Gintis (1977) suggest that education is prominent in determining future positioning in the workplace and society. Willis' (1977) study, illustrated that there were significant discrepancies across the different classes. Furthermore, due to a

working-class culture, individuals may not view qualifications as important (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). However, parental 'interest' in school (Johnson & Ransom, 1983) and a child's education (Craft, Raynor and Cohen, 1972) is crucial and this support may demonstrate how irrespective of class, many working-class parents are "investing in cultural capital" (Halsey, Heath and Ridge, 1980, p. 73-97; Bourdieu, 1986) for their children to achieve to the best of their ability. This contrasts with the expected working-class culture as it is like the expectations of middle-class parents as this resonates with middle-class expectations.

Willis (1981) identifies that it is at the point of education through the "counter-school culture" that class "destiny" is developed. For example, he highlights how it is "here where working class themes" are transmitted to "individuals and groups in their own determinate context" and then "working class kids creatively develop, transform and finally reproduce aspects of the larger culture in their own praxis in such a way as to finally direct them to certain kinds of work" (Willis, 1981, p. 2). For example, this may be in the case of a working-class student who has left school with no formal qualifications and may have been viewed as disaffected (Mittler, 2000). They may also have experienced "social exclusion" (Giddens, 2009, p. 498) illustrated by features such as barriers to employment and a low income alongside poor parental support (Whitney, 2007). Furthermore, an individual's dismissal of qualifications and disengagement may link with Willis' stance.

In addition to this, individuals may then struggle to gain employment or have the knowledge or 'power' (Foucault, 1967, 1978) to fully participate in opportunities. This form of "social stratification" (Giddens, 2009, p. 432) relates to Bernstein's (1975) use of the extended and

restricted codes used by teachers in education that can oppress working-class pupils from fully participating due to their lack of understanding of middle-class language and 'norms' (Durkheim, 1984). This can result in a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1957) inducing a cyclical process generating low expectations, reduced opportunities and disengagement often stemming from education and continuing into later life e.g. workplace (Willis, 1981). More recently, Reay (2006) illustrates a more generic view of the progress for working-class pupils and highlights "an attainment gap" (Reay, 2006, p. 304) supported by Abercrombie (2004) who indicates that social class is a crucial factor in social divisions and education in modern societies as it not only influences a person's financial means but also other areas of their lives.

The impact of early educational experiences was evident in the literature and was often a motivating factor for individuals deciding to return to study. For example, Scanlon (2008) suggests that many individuals had returned to education after leaving school at a compulsory age and it was not until the point that their career or employment opportunities required them to have a further or higher qualification did they decide to actively improve their educational attainment. Scanlon (2008) presented explanations such as individuals wanting to achieve qualifications that they did not achieve or could not gain at an earlier point in their lives or that they felt that they need to meet previous goals and fulfil earlier aspirations that they had. There may be instances when these prior experiences may have formed a negative perception of education that individuals want to overcome and change not only their opinion of education but often their anxieties regarding studying and academic self-worth. Scanlon (2008) summarises that the political and economic climate is a shaping factor influencing

individual's decision making alongside the firmly embedded culture of lifelong learning (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2000, p. 169).

One position that challenges to a certain degree the oppression of women is liberal feminism as briefly discussed earlier that adopts the standpoint of equality between men and women through proposing political and legislative reform (Hekman, 2013). It focuses on the transformation of women through individual choice and actions. For instance, in relation to HE, initiatives have been introduced to address this disparity and may be viewed as a positive step towards widening participation in HE. This may also provide an opportunity to show that women's educational and academic abilities are comparative with their male counterparts (Hayton & Paczuska, 2003). This stance resonates with early key writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) work that highlighted the restraints faced by women including the societal, political and environmental limitations that they encounter in complete contrast to the experiences of men (Field, 2011). Through her work, she endeavoured for educational equality through challenging the barriers that women needed to overcome wanting distinctively for women to be viewed as an equal person in society (Field, 2011). Wollstonecraft (1792) in *Vindication of the Rights of the Woman* illustrated that "men and women must be educated in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society that they live in".

Historically there was a series of guidance and education acts introduced including The Foster Act (1870) and The Butler Act (1944), Skeleton, 1997 cited in Evans & Abbott, 1998) highlights that it was from the point of second-wave feminism that many liberal feminists strived for

fairness within the education system. This included Davies (1868) who called for a 'common standard' towards the end of the nineteenth century and this was later reiterated by the 1970's need for equality. To discuss gendered curriculum and gendered education it is necessary to refer to the Hadow Reports 1923-1933 and the Norwood Report 1943, that provide a historical insight into the early nineteenth century and secondary schooling for boys and girls (Gillard 2006).

The notable six Hadow Reports 1923-1933 were particularly important in terms of showing differences in gendered education as one of the proposals was that girls should be protected from "physical fatigue and nervous overstrain" (Hadow 1923, p. 139). It also highlighted how there should be consideration of other duties that girls have including work and homework responsibilities. They proposed that education provisions must be mindful of "the relatively heavy domestic duties often performed by them in their homes" (Hadow 1923, p. 140). Thus, demonstrating the assumed gender differences and educational expectations. However, this report concluded that girls should be "adequately represented on all committees and examining bodies which deal in any way with girls' education" (Hadow 1923, p. 141) suggesting that women were beginning to be more pertinent in educational thinking.

The later Norwood Report (1943) recommended that children should be separated into three distinctive groups. Grammar schools for those children who were viewed to be more academic, technical schools for those children who were believed to be more scientifically minded, leaving the remaining children to attend secondary schools. Even though Gillard (2007) suggests that Norwood called for equality between the three types of schooling, it

became evident that this 'tripartite' system raised concerns about the practical implications and divisions amongst them.

In some respects, there have been developments in terms of academic attainment that is reflected in the yearly published GCSE publications although Skeleton (1997 cited in Evans & Abbott, 1998) suggests that it is at the point of compulsory education or in their career that women are faced with the 'discriminatory' practices of the educational system in Britain. In relation to this, access to FE and HE may also be challenging and Walby (1997) furthers the earlier points made regarding the restrictions placed on women to remain within the home. Walby (1997) suggests that there are many conditions that make it difficult for women to advance themselves either in the workplace or academically and debates the challenges in accessing education due to an array of factors such as low paid work, job insecurity or poor prospects. Walby (1997, p. 165) argues that certain groups of women such as working-class women and those from ethnic minority groups are considerably disadvantaged. Therefore, Walby (1990, p. 8) critiques the standpoint of solely taking a class analysis approach as it can "ignore gender relations" and the impact that this can have on women.

To conclude, the literature reviewed in terms of educational theory is heavily situated in educational sociology of the 1970s (Pascall and Cox, 1993, p. 142) and because of this draws substantially upon traditional Marxist and Functionalist perspectives. Also, amongst the literature reviewed, there appears to be considerable disparity between the theories surrounding women retuning to education that focus on the idea of educational institutions replicating the structures that may be seen to oppress women compared to the experiences

that women shared in several studies such as Pascall and Cox (1993). In contrast, their study showed how women viewed education as a way of stepping away from their domestic lives, changing their employment prospects and gaining independence. This stance resonates with early feminist thinkers such as Blackstone (1987) and highlights how education can be a means of tackling oppression and creating new opportunities. In contrast to many theories presented, although women may be faced with problems that they must overcome, they viewed education in a positive light that provided them with an opportunity to enhance themselves both personally and professionally.

There seemed to be awareness amongst women of the educational structures and this was often in the form of early school experiences that many women felt equipped them primarily for their role as mother, wife and family life. However, Pascall and Cox (1993, p. 140) recognised that it was at the point of HE that these women felt they could overcome structural challenges through a renowned freedom enabling them to make choices about their future. Arnot (1984, p. 74) reminds us that we must not forget the barriers that were overcome by feminist politics for women to access HE (Kamm, 1965) and states “one of the greatest women’s struggles has been fought over the right of access to and social mobility through the educational system”. Irrespective of these achievements, individuals continue to deliberate the costs and benefits of returning to HE which is a fundamental aspect of calculating “educational value” (Boudon, 1974, p. 30). This argument is evident in the literature with women waiting in some instances until they had less child care commitments or felt that they were financially able to survive the journey.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction and aims of research

The aim of this research was to explore women's experiences of HE by specifically focusing on the viewpoints of a small sample of mature women who have completed an accredited qualification at a HE establishment. The objectives were to discover through an ethnographic study the experiences of women who have studied for a qualification following a gap in formal education. My study attempted to enable the women to tell their stories unreservedly about their experiences of returning to education and I did not want the questions to confine the participants to answering them in any way.

3.2 Research questions and focus of study

Through an ethnographic framework (Silverman, 2013) a series of research questions have been developed to find out about what it is like to embark on a course of study at HE as a mature woman. These research questions sought to gain insight through the women's accounts and develop a greater understanding of their experiences in their context. In the research design, I noted several key questions and areas that I hoped may be explored through the women's narratives by adopting a qualitative design (Cresswell, 1994, Silverman, 2013). These topics are outlined below;

- What are the experiences of women who have returned to HE as mature students and completed an undergraduate or postgraduate course of study?

- How do women who have returned to education to study at higher educational level perceive themselves as learners?
- What are the aspirations of women who have returned to education as mature students and completed a HE qualification?
- What are the factors that have motivated them to embark on a HE course of study?
- How is HE conceptualised by women returning to HE as mature students?

Hammersley (1992, p. 57) states that ethnography is disputed to be an alternative paradigm to quantitative social research that is primarily concerned with the “nature of human life”. This argument is relevant to my research as through capturing the experiences of the women I did not aim to prove a hypothesis or viewpoint but attempted to gain a level of understanding through their stories. Therefore, it was important to allow the women to tell their narratives wholeheartedly. Consequently, their accounts included factors that were influential to their learning opportunities based on their experiences of a specific period in their lives. Thus, these experiences could not be replicated in any additional research as although there may be similarities in certain instances this research was explicit to the women in the study at that time.

This point of view is reiterated by Lichtman (2012, p. 37) who implies that “qualitative [research] questions ask *why* and *how*, rather than *what* and *how many*”. Furthermore, Clough and Nutbrown, (2002, p. 4) propose that research is primarily focused to “investigate” and “explore” issues rather than proving a hypothesis. They suggest that irrespective of the philosophical framework, “all research” aims to ask questions, explore problems and interpret

the data to "make meaning from the data". Subsequently, Habermas' (1972, p. 300) analysis of positivism and quantitative methods claims that quantitative research does not offer all the answers to social life and that one of the strengths of qualitative methods is that it proposes an alternative approach to understanding the world, but it does not seek to offer all the solutions.

3.3 *Essence of ethnography*

One of the key distinctions of my study from a pure ethnography is that I have selected to use ethnographic methods to gather the data but recognise that it is not an ethnography. In the next section, I will present a clear and concise exposition of how my study has key ethnographic features before offering a critique of my choice of methods. This study draws upon ethnography and Marxist Feminist theory. This provided an interpretative basis (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) to explore women's experiences of returning to HE gathered through the ethnographic interviews conducted and contextualised by Marxist Feminism. To justify the approach taken in my study, it is necessary to discuss alternative research positions by considering their strengths and weaknesses, thus validating the approach undertaken.

I feel for the benefit of situating my study, I need to make a clear distinction between a more 'pure' ethnography and my use of ethnographic methods as I am using techniques such as interviews in the research. Consequently, Gilbert, (1993, p. 157) encapsulates that principally ethnography always involves the study of behaviour in "natural setting" as he argues that to acquire a sense of this knowledge one must develop an understanding of the "symbolic

world” in which they live. I wanted to explore the experiences of mature women in their journey of returning to education and ethnography was the most appropriate choice; it enabled the women to tell their stories about their individual experiences of returning to HE. This required adapting the ethnographic methods accordingly to tailor the approach to enable me to see the women’s world through their viewpoint and in their usual environment.

By adopting a qualitative (Liam Puttang & Essy, 2005) and explanatory approach it illustrated several strengths of using ethnographic methodology. Furthermore, Brewer (2000, p. 6) defines ethnography as “the study of people in naturally occurring setting” or “fields” by methods of data collection which capture their “social meanings” and “ordinary activities”. As stated earlier, it was important to recognise alternative viewpoints as several feminist researchers critique “artificial dichotomies” in traditional research such as the division between a deductive and inductive approach as being interrelated to one another (Stanley and Wise, 1990, p. 22). However, an ethnographic approach may reject this idea based on subjective and personal nature of qualitative ethnographic research.

3.4 An investigative exploratory inductive position

Many traditional research based texts stipulate a distinctive division between research paradigms such as Denzin and Lincoln, (2000); Guba and Lincoln, (1994) who offer a divisional approach between undertaking a qualitative and a quantitative study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000, p. 8) suggest that there is an opposing stance between the two paradigms that is characterised by the emphasis that is placed on aspects of the approach such as the focus on

measurability and analysis. They argue that a more qualitative approach relies on “processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured”. Here the focus is on the importance of the “socially constructed nature of reality” and the relationship between the researcher and the participants. In relation to my study, this demonstrates the importance of establishing a good rapport with the women to enable them to talk openly about their experiences. By using ethnographic interviews, conversations can be established (Spradley, 1979; Guba and Lincoln, 1994) that allow the women to reflect on their time at university. Through a ‘naturalist inquiry’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), the dialogues presented through the interviews have allowed interactions between myself as the researcher and the women which has enabled the collection of narratives based on their ‘reality’ of being a mature student.

May (2001) argues that there is a perceived difference between the natural and social sciences supported by Giddens (1997, p. 12) who suggests that “unlike objects in nature”, social science attempts to capture interactions and behaviour. This variation is exemplified by the fact that unlike natural science, social science cannot truly be replicated in “experimental conditions” as social science is governed by unique “sociological laws” (Marsh, Campbell, & Keating, 1998, p. 294) that are specific to time and place. Based on these differences the validity of social science is often contested by the scientific community (Gilbert, 1993) in addition to credibility and reliability. In relation to my study, the women’s narratives illustrate behaviours and attitudes to learning that are highlighted through their accounts and contextualised in their culture.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggests that a further criticism perceived by some academics in relation to qualitative research is that it does not hold the same credibility and reliability of quantitative methods. For example, quantitative methods are professed as having more reliability and this point is reaffirmed by Bryman (2008, p. 155) who states that quantitative methods produce data that is valid and reliable as “measurement, causality, generalization and replication”. However, using the adapted criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 114) my research may be judged based on its “trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability”. However, they note that the “quality issue for constructivism remains a contested issue”.

To scrutinise this division further, Bryman (2008, p. 22) explains that “quantitative research can be construed as a research strategy that emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data” whereas “qualitative research can be construed as a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data”. Bryman’s idea has relevance as this highlights that there is what has been referred to be a ‘paradigm war’ (Bryman, 2008) through social inquiry illustrating the conflicting positions between quantitative and qualitative research. These debates have been driven by key figures such as Hammersley (1992) highlighting the juxtaposition of ontological and epistemological positions. These interpretivist and positivist philosophies are dependent upon their methodological and theoretical standpoints.

Yet, Bryman (2008) suggests that their dissimilarities are frequently overstated based on their ‘philosophical terms’. For example, due to the presence or absence of quantification in terms

of qualitative research and a tendency for researchers to be less reflective in quantitative research approaches. In addition to this, Kuhn (1970) was influentially significant in arguing that the two philosophical viewpoints were incompatible in the sense that there are distinguishing characteristics that separate the paradigms due to fundamental methodological issues.

In addition to this, Burrell and Morgan (1979) offer an interesting viewpoint on the distinctive paradigms and outline four perceptions of the social world exemplified through their consideration of organisation theory. They suggest that this could be looked at through four models including an interpretative and functionalist paradigm. Burrell and Morgan (1979, p. 24) present “four views of the social world founded upon different meta-theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of science and society” and founded on these assumptions are irreconcilable. Based on the arguments offered, it is issues of compatibility and their associated differences that give resonance to the idea of a ‘paradigm war’ (Bryman, 2008). This point is also captured by Merton and Kendall (1986, p. 549) who suggest that the selection and decision making is dependent upon the researcher to decide at what stages and points do they need to “adopt” one approach and “at which the other approach”. This proposes that through the location of research within a specific research paradigm alongside selected methods, the researcher can then frame this in relation to a position, appropriateness and specific “phenomena” (Clough & Nutbrown, 2002, p. 18).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) propose an alternate vantage point regarding the division between quantitative and qualitative research through a mixed method approach that is a

combination of the two methods that is often referred to by some researchers as a 'third way'. However, there is evidence to suggest that this mixed method research has been used in earlier classical studies such as *Marienthal* (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld & Zeisel, 1972) to gather data. Moreover, these disparities derived later. Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen, (2008) suggests that this was following an increase in the dominance of quantitative research as the most principal body of knowledge legitimised in key influential writings for instance Goode and Hatt (1952) text 'Methods in Social Research'. It is essential to contextualise the reasons why the opposed paradigms are noted to have a degree of polarisation to one another. This is also evidenced by the dominance of quantitative research over qualitative research due to its assumed scientific credibility.

As stated earlier, although it is rather simplistic to separate the two epistemological positions it is useful to understand their key features and characteristics. Positivist approaches apply a similar thinking to other natural sciences where there are governing laws and indicators that are used to organise knowledge. Therefore, positivistic researchers may use patterns to objectify data that is associated with a scientific approach. Arguably, an interpretivist approach applies a more personal response to the data examining the 'subjective' (Gilbert, 1993) explorations and meanings that shape people's behaviours and interactions with one another. Additionally, these approaches would inevitably guide and influence how research is focused and conducted.

May (1997, p. 18) suggests that research is dominated by men through their ideas and practices replicated through values in the social world. These views are "perpetuated"

through what is described as a “scientific cloak” built upon biases. May (1997, p. 18) offers three arguments that highlight this consensus amongst feminist writers. Firstly, illustrating how “women’s contributions to social and cultural life” have been “marginalised” reflected in research practices. Secondly, identifying the dominance of men through their “superiority” and unequal distribution of power that represents the male dominated position men have in both the “social and natural world”. Thirdly, May (1997) suggests that gender has not been explored or categorised as a separate “social category” nor has it been understood as a social phenomenon with the same importance as other categories such as race or social class. Therefore, it is vital to recognise feminist criticisms in research and consider their implications on the way in which it affects it. The implications of May’s argument in terms of my research is realised through the interviews; the women have a space to give their stories and share aspects of their journey that they as women feel is important through their viewpoint. Thus, offering this ‘marginalised’ group control of this situation, they can contribute to knowledge through the study and be listened to completely.

Dean and Whyte (1958) state that one critique of the ethnographic method is that as it inevitably subjective and biases cannot be fully eradicated. Although, they suggest that one way that the researcher can safeguard against such bias is to be conscious of the causes. For example, they illustrate that biases can come from the participants, including ulterior motives or feeling that they need to give the researcher the information that they think that they want. Therefore, this desire to please may influence the responses that they provide. However, they offer practical suggestions that the researcher can utilise to ‘control’ bias to the best of their ability. This includes, using their observational skills to see if the participant’s

behaviour is consistent with the answers given. Other factors include credibility, the dependability of the participants, an insight of the participant's mind-set and the ability to review the responses from the other participants against one another.

These points illustrate how the researcher locates their research in a paradigm (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012) that subsequently determines the other methodological decisions that follow. In the instance of adopting an interpretative approach, the emphasis in this research through a small-scale research study strives to engage and capture the "human interaction" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 42) that is "continuously re-creating social life" in order to understand these actions and gain a sense of meaning from it. My research aimed to capture the interactions and experiences that the women had when returning to education and explored the difficulties that they faced and how they overcame these barriers to learning to complete their course. Through the interviews, I could engage in discussions regarding their experiences through their stories and explanations about what their journey had been like for them as a mature student with family responsibilities, work commitments and other roles.

To summarise, this section of the methodology chapter considered a range of methodologies and examined some of the weaknesses regarding my selected approach, but it has also highlighted various strengths. However, although there are many criticisms of adopting an ethnographic approach to research such as validity and the impact of the researcher, I decided that this was the most appropriate choice for this research. In the following section of this chapter the methods selected will be explored further, considering how these methods were used to find out the experiences of the women.

3.5 Research design

Foreword to research design and methods

The previous section discussed alternative paradigms and began to analyse ethnography and ethnographic techniques including key criticisms. This section will illustrate how the research design and methods have been developed from this extenuating how ethnography is suitable to this study above any other methodologies. In this section, I will explain the research method undertaken and justify why I chose this research design.

As a researcher, I have selected the methodological framework according to the qualitative methodologies undertaken in order specifically to “find out” and “understand” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 5) women’s experiences of returning to education. Guided by the epistemological considerations and methodological approach, I will discuss the research methods used to gain an insight into the experiences of a small group of women. The study presents the women’s narratives gathered by techniques used through an ethnographic approach such as semi structured interviews. These were conducted to understand the women’s experiences exploring any challenges that they encountered during their studies. These experiences will be discussed in greater depth throughout the subsequent findings and discussion chapters in the thesis.

Before selecting my final research design, I considered other approaches by outlining strengths and weaknesses and appropriateness to my study, thus clarifying my selected methodology. Walker (1985) suggests that methods are a key element of the research study

and that the selection is as crucial as the area proposed to investigate and I wanted to ensure that the design was the most fitting method to collect the women's stories. Clough and Nutbrown (2012) argue that one of the expectations of the methodology is to attempt to 'explain' and 'justify' the approach undertaken furthered by Walker (1985) who highlights that method is an 'intrinsic' part of the issue that cannot be separated. This point is demonstrated by Walker's (1985, p. 87) claim that- "just as recipes are not simply things that are done to food but become concepts within which method and substance are compounded, so 'method' in research can become an intrinsic part of the project". This illustrates how method is inextricably linked to the research. This is summarised by Walker (1985, p. 87) who states that the methods selected are "there to be tested, just as much as the substantive hypothesis". Consequently, the researcher is "faced with a variety of options and alternatives and must make strategic decisions about which to choose" (Denscombe, 1998, p. 3). Again, this reiterates the importance of the role of the researcher in the decision-making process.

3.6 Research methods

The rationale for these methods was due to both accessibility and feedback from the women involved in the study who were keen to share their experiences. Many of these women had demanding work commitments alongside balancing other obligations. Some of the women interviewed expressed that these conversations had provided an opportunity for them to pause and reflect on a specific period in their lives that they had not necessarily considered before.

Through my research, I wanted the women to tell their stories in their environment to explore their social world in their context. This point is exemplified by Clough (1995) below;

‘Method’ in social science subverts a profound human impulse to tell stories about the world as we see it. Method undoes the truth, for we put in method a trust it could not start to understand, being without feeling. We ask method to do something-to validate our work-which we cannot do ourselves. All method can do-or at least as we know it in the social sciences-all method can do is reflect back to us our lack of engagement with our work, a lack we must announce as the very condition of our professionalism (Clough, 1995, p. 126).

This viewpoint is important to my research as my position in the research means that I share similar experiences of returning to education as I have also been a mature student at university. Because of this, I am conscious that there may be some commonalities in the women’s accounts and the obstacles that I have faced. However, I am clear that I do not want to look for shared experiences or topics directly relating to my experiences in the research but wanted to enable the women through their perspectives to share their ‘world’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Through using the selected ethnographical theoretical framework as a foundation to the research, I could understand the difficulties of returning to education including topics encountered by the women who participated in the study. It was interesting to note how the issues emerging in the study related to previous studies in the theoretical field such as the effect of certain features like financial concerns and networks of support on their experiences. More generally, the research highlighted the challenges faced by women in

terms of managing their time effectively, multi-tasking and juggling home and employment whilst studying.

The ethnographic interview

I will now discuss the use of interviews in ethnography and justify my choice of selecting semi-structured interviews for the data collection. I have recognised a variety of features required for effective interviewing such as the need to establish relationships and create a productive atmosphere. I have also considered the impact that these factors may have had on the collection of the women's experiences at all stages of the data collection. Spradley (1979, p. 92) argues that "ethnography all begins with the same general problem: what are the cultural meanings people are using to organise their behaviour and interpret their experience?". In the context of my research, this may explore the reasons why women decide to return to education and how they manage their studies alongside other responsibilities. The literature reviewed considered key issues women face when returning to education and my research explores the culture of the women and how they cope along their journey alongside their relationships with others during their studies.

Moreover, traditional ethnographic studies (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), specify that researchers act as observers on the outside of a culture that is different from their own. This requires a critical awareness that is separate from the researcher and those being investigated. Subsequently, ethnography has evolved over time and Quinn Patton (2002, p. 81) argues that the emphasis has shifted towards asking questions like "what is the culture of this group of

people?” and this examination is applicable to my study as I aimed to uncover the experiences of women by considering their circumstances rather than attempting to act as a member of their community. The interview is itself a social construction (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and because of this point, I decided that it would be more holistic to interview the five participants using semi-structured interviews to allow them to steer the direction of the interview based on the topics that were most important to them and that I as the researcher would describe their experience but would not be able to live them.

Dean and Whyte (1958) suggest three key ways in which we can ‘conceptualise’ an interview. They demonstrate how multiple influential aspects such as ‘bias’ and ‘beliefs and attitudes’ affect the interpretation of the interview. This is furthered by Hammersley and Gomm (1997) work as they outline that bias in social research is not uncommon nor easy to define and recognise how this can cause a deviation for ascertaining the ‘truth’. Throughout the interviews, I ensured that the women could tell their stories without questioning the validity of their accounts but recognising that their perceptions present the ‘truths’ of their experiences through their perspectives.

Through considering these dilemmas and by adopting an ethnographic approach, I hoped to explore the five women’s experiences through an interpretive inquiry (Creswell, 1994). In addition to this, through using an inductive process (Liam Puttong & Essy, 2005) I aimed to understand the lived experiences of the women. I selected semi-structured interviews to collect that data based on the suitability and flexibility (Bell, 2014) of this method. One advantage of using interviews for this project is that through exploration and investigation

(Wiseman & Aron, 1972) alongside the “interplay” between the researcher/interviewer and the participant (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 198) the researcher can explore key points and issues.

I carried out semi-structured interviews using an interview guide (Appendix F), that was reviewed for each participant, that listed each topic, so I could prepare the themes for questions. This is because semi-structured interviews often require more prompting and probing (Brinkmann, 2014) and I felt that this would support the direction of the research. The interview guide helped me to avoid the interview losing direction and enabled me to gather information that was useful in the analysis of data. The use of an interview guide is different from using a schedule as Gilbert (1993, p. 97) suggests that “a schedule contains set questions in a predetermined order adhered to in each interview” whereas an interview guide “can be quite sketchy to allow for the possibility of non-direct interviewing in which the interviewee replies determine the course of the interview”. My interpretation of the significance of these selections is that in my study by using an interview guide rather than an interview schedule through our conversations, if the women are providing limited responses or are struggling to tell me about their experiences I can prompt them as necessary by asking them open ended questions to help them to share their stories.

Interviewing techniques

I selected to use semi-structured interviews due to the flexibility of being able to explore the women’s stories unreservedly listening to topics that were important to them. This meant

that the collection of data through qualitative interviewing was like “conversations...but with a purpose” (Burgess, 1984, p. 102) and offered a more personal approach. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) claim that there are a range of advantages and disadvantages to interviewing and of the process of transcribing the data collected from interviews. For example, the researcher can focus primarily on the very act of interviewing the participants rather than being distracted from recording what is said. This enables the interviewer to take note of other aspects such as observing body language, expressions and tone and pace that is additional useful information. Again, the interviewer can use their time to focus exclusively on listening; prompting when required and generally is more attentive to the participant. This was useful in my research as I could appreciate how difficult certain aspects and topics had been for the women by recognising the changes in their facial expressions, body language and tone of voice.

The interviews were conducted exclusively and both verbal and nonverbal reactions (when appropriate) were recorded to acquire a better feel for the women and their experiences. The interviews were carried out at the women’s home address (as requested) which resulted in a more relaxed atmosphere and encouraged the women to freely express their opinions. By creating a trusting environment, I could develop a relationship with the women who mentioned following the interviews that they had felt able to talk about their experiences. Cohen et al. (2007, p. 198) outlines that through the interaction “between interviewer and interviewee” the researcher can tease out key points or issues. On reflection, I believe that through the dialogues in the interviews I could encourage the women to share their experiences openly about returning to HE. To summarise, Gray (1998, p. 12) illustrates how

narratives are valuable “to the researcher, the participants and to cultural groups” as it allowed an insight into the women’s journeys through HE through a relational connection and establishing rapport (Opie, 2004). I have confidence that the interviews were beneficial in some way to the women as it may have helped them to reflect and think about if these experiences had shaped their lives whether personally or professionally.

Kvale (1996) suggests that there are certain aspects that can make a purposeful dialogue and effective interviewer such as structuring the interview in a way that encourages the interview to start and finish in a positive way. It also involves allowing the participants time to express themselves freely without feeling rushed and the researcher to listen attentively (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). Therefore, patience, breaks when necessary and room for thinking time is essential to reflect and have time to think before proceeding. Throughout the interview the researcher is not only able to have breaks but can prompt and probe more deeply (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Additionally, Kvale (1996) identifies that it is vital for the interview to have a sense of direction, knowing where the discussion is heading and by using a range of questioning styles that are relative to the subject matter. This must be clearly conducted without the use of jargon to enable the participants to fully participate.

Through actively facilitating the interview the interviewer can relate, challenge and clarify areas and encourage the participants to explore further any issues raised. Through the interviews with the women, I strived to ensure that their stories were clearly reflected as Gomm (2004) suggests that it is important that participants do not feel that they must answer any questions in a way that provides the researcher with information and answers that they

feel that the researcher wants to hear. This is referred to as *demand characteristics* (Gomm, 2004) that can influence the participant's responses. Considering this, I explained to the women the purpose of the interview clearly before conducting it to avoid the women feeling that they must respond to questions in an assumed manner.

Dean and Whyte (1958) argue that at every point of ethnographic research the emphasis is on the researcher to interpret and 'translate' the respondent's views expressed in the interviews. However, this is not only the point of interviewing as the researcher is faced with the task of translation and interpretation during the collection of field notes including the selection of direct quotations or paraphrasing of ideas. In addition to this, the researcher is required to 'translate' and interpret (Bell, 2014) these views and put them into field notes that can be drawn upon to make meaning from the data, which as discussed earlier risks bias being imposed onto the research data by the researcher. This argument is further expanded by (Spradley, 1979, p. 24) who stresses that "every ethnographic description is a translation" and it is equally important to use the "native terms" and their "meanings" alongside the ethnographers "interpretations". This highlights that "in ethnography *discovery* we should make maximum use of the 'native' language" and "in ethnographic *description* we should represent the meaning encoded in that language as closely as possible". This is important to ensure that the research is conducted both ethically and morally and that the research data is true to its participants being studied (Bell, 2014).

In my study, it was important to record personal impressions and feelings, as one of the problems researchers may face is how to stay out of each participant's frame of reference

(Glibert, 1993) since I am also a mature student who has returned to education. This issue is illustrated by Simons, (1981, p.3). who also relates this to interviewing, about the preconceptions that individuals bring to the interview and states that “both the interviewer and the interviewee bring preconceptions to the interview which will affect what they say, hear and report, and which may be confirmed or changed during the interview”. I feel it is important to constantly reflect on my ontology (Crotty, 1998) as this not only shapes my judgements and understanding of the world through my values (Weber, 1964) but is prevalent in all my roles as a researcher, a professional, mother and wife. As a researcher, I must consider my approach to collecting the data and the later analysis. In terms of reflexivity, it is crucial that I recognize significant issues and consider my own beliefs and experiences about oppressing factors for example ethnicity and sexuality.

To summarise my position in the research, at the time of the collection of the primary research my role was as a mature student at Chester University where I too was experiencing first hand similar challenges to those that the students had expressed that they had faced. I realised from the onset that this was a difficult position considering that I had a working relationship with two of the participants and in one instance a previous supervisory relationship to one of the women interviewed. I aimed to ensure that all data selected was as free from ‘personal contamination’ (Gilbert, 1993) as possible through the choice of data collection for example, the transcription of the tapes were transcribed ‘word for word’ so not to record the women’s answers through my own interpretation. If I had resorted to solely notating the women’s responses, it may have been less valid due to my interpretation and personal influence in the way in which the data was recorded. Furthermore, I felt that I

displayed an open-minded attitude and was honest about the aims of research. Alongside the choice of methods selected, feedback from women was always a prime consideration in my planning, reflection and how the research was conducted. Later in the methodology chapter, I will reflect on my position as a researcher in the research process and discuss the impact of relationships in the interview context, the influence of emotions and how my research aimed to empower the women studied.

3.7 Sample, accessibility and establishing relationships

For this research, five women ranging from 24 to 50 years old (Appendix E) were contacted through either personal or professional contacts and whilst all participants live and work in the north-west of England they are from different cultural and educational backgrounds. This provided a variety of experiences and perspectives as although their roles and experiences overlapped in certain areas their accounts, such as reasons for wanting to return to education, were unique to their circumstances.

For this piece of research, the women selected for the interviews were both previous work colleagues and previous students contacted via a 'gatekeeper' (Neuman, 2000). As I have worked and studied in the same area as three of the women, I found it easier to establish access to gatekeepers. A 'snowballing' technique was used for sampling as I contacted the five women by using both work and personal contacts to build up a sample group which I then studied. Neuman (2000, p. 199) illustrates this point as he states, "the critical feature is that each person or unit relates to another through direct or indirect linkage". The women in this

research were recruited on an entirely voluntary basis accessed through a mixture of personal and professional connections through a “snowball approach”. I used purposive sampling (Gilbert, 1993) as a means of ensuring that all the women had a common interest in the research. By using a snowball technique all the participants involved related to one another through either a ‘direct or indirect linkage’ (Neuman, 2000). By using a specific sampling frame (Silverman, 2013) I could ensure that the sample selected was appropriate to the study due to their experiences of a HE environment. One of the drawbacks of this approach was that I was responsible for selecting the sample and therefore may have restricted the selection of women. This might have excluded other potential participants who may have brought a different perspective to the study but were not viewed as having an interest in this area.

I considered various potential issues and barriers and the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Silverman, 2013) for the research was that participants were women who have completed either an undergraduate or postgraduate academic course at a university based in the United Kingdom. Due to issues surrounding transportation and accessibility, this excluded students who are not based in the north-west of England. One justification for this sample size was based on the time and resources available for this project alongside my ability to manage the data effectively as an inexperienced researcher. The sample groups of women I researched were not classified as vulnerable but irrespective of this I treated all participants with respect and dignity and recognised that there is an uneven distribution of power in the relationship between the researcher and participant. For example, I led the questioning and research process and later controlled what data was selected in the findings section. As a researcher, I

had a duty (Silverman, 2013) to ensure that participants were recruited on an entirely voluntary basis and I briefed the women before the research began.

Plummer (1983) believes that the preparation and selection of participants is paramount and identifies the benefits of maintaining a close, productive relationship with 'mutual respect' between the interviewer and the interviewee. It was important to attempt to establish productive relations with the women as I realised that they would be sharing their personal journey including the difficulties that they have faced which may be of a sensitive nature. Additionally, establishing rapport and demonstrating effective listening skills are important parts of the research process (Cohen et al., 2007). Contrary to this, inappropriate meeting venues, interruptions, low level noise and other distractions could hinder the interview process. In my research, I recognised potential challenges in my research such as how to give some degree of structure to the interviews (if required) alongside acknowledging that the women's account of their experiences is unique and specific to them. So, I could not predict their responses or influence the themes or topics that arose. Based on this point, the interviews did not project a rigid framework to restrict the women's stories or discourage them from sharing their experiences.

Nevertheless, the practicalities of the study demanded a clear but flexible approach to the collection of data and I applied the use of a research schedule (Silverman, 2013) to act as a prompt to guide the collection of data. This was alongside structuring the process into achievable targets that incorporated key events and dates that shaped the schedule to take account of the participants work and family commitments in addition to my own. Campbell,

Kyriakides, Muijs and Robinson, (2004) demonstrate the need to plan work in a 'realistic' and achievable way to ensure that any timescales are structured and manageable for the researcher and participants involved. This demanded the collaboration between myself and the women and highlighted the need to regularly revisit and adjust any plans accordingly. This was exercised using a research diary (Wellington, Bathmaker, Hunt, McCulloch & Sikes, 2005) that outlined and managed any agreed timescales.

3.8 Coming to know the data.

Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p. 20-21) present how the aim of research is not necessarily framed around "proving" a viewpoint but is more focussed on "enquiry" and "investigation". The researcher can explore issues and reflect on "what emerges to make meaning from the data and tell the research story". The process of data collection allowed the collection of patterns and themes that emerged in the women's stories. Once the data was collected, it was transcribed and collated to identify and evaluate any 'themes' that emerged through 'thematic analysis' (Cohen et al., 2007). Then, general themes and categories were gathered to examine what areas were either similar, reoccurring or in complete contrast. Using a model adapted from Cohen et al., (2007, p.483) (Appendices G), I utilised a staged model approach to understand the data, collate themes from the data and present key findings. I aimed to interpret the data (Guest, 2012) and identify links between the findings and literature reviewed.

Even though I am an inexperienced researcher, by using a staged process, I could also engage with (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and manage the data effectively. Through manually transcribing and analysing the data I could familiarise myself with the women's narratives more closely than if I was to have used other computerised methods of data analysis. I also allowed themes to naturally emerge from the data (Saldana, 2009). Powney and Watts (1987) state that although there are significant advantages to using this method it also has demands such as the time required to transcribe the data alongside the need to analyse and categorise the data into manageable and meaningful themes (Boyatzis, 1998). I acknowledge that reliability can also be a perceived disadvantage to this method (Guest, 2012) but feel that there were several advantages to this method including enabling a flexible (Braun, 2006) method of analysis.

In addition to identifying patterns and themes in the data, Clough and Nutbrown, (2012) suggest that the researcher may want to understand a set of circumstances or make a positive contribution or evoke a change. However, they also emphasise how the desire to achieve a positive outcome 'for the better' may be problematic. Irrespective of this, they place a firm emphasis on the fact that a researcher may feel that they need to 'persuade' an audience through their accounts but note that they must keep ethical considerations at the forefront of their work. Furthermore, Clough and Nutbrown (2002, p. 4) stipulate that "all social research" begins from a viewpoint and strives to "persuade readers" in terms of its worth. Moreover, they also claim that this is always "political" and this suggests that this is a fundamental characteristic of research.

The need for persuasion in social research is apparent and Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) illustrate that social research is not only persuasive but also purposive as it seeks to discover understanding. Goodwin and Goodwin (1996) suggest;

In a general sense, research means finding out...the types, or methods have in common the generation of knowledge at varying levels of detail, sophistication, and generalizability. Research in the creation of knowledge to solve a problem, answer a question, and a better describe or understand something. In all of these instances, producing new knowledge highlights the research process aimed at finding out (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 5).

It is at the point of distribution that Stenhouse (1975) argues that research gains meaning and argues that without research being made public to its audience research becomes irrelevant. Through the contextualisation of which research is written and later reported is when it is realised. For example, Stenhouse (1975) argues that research is not conducted in isolation but is influenced and shaped by many factors including the researcher, context, participants and methods used. Therefore, through this process and the interactions taking place research is construed. Hannon (1998) builds upon this viewpoint by stating that we need to contemplate research as a being connected to its environment that is 'constantly' changing (Hannon, 1998, in Crotty, 1998). Similarly, to Stenhouse (1975) this demonstrates that the way in which a researcher constructs their research including the methods selected, purpose of research, and their position such as their political position inevitably influences the research.

Values form an integral part of the research process and the very act of conducting research and being involved in the social world that I am examining means that my ontological position "is not a matter of methodological commitment [but] is an existential fact" (Hammerlsey &

Atkinson, 1983, p. 15). One of the main characteristics of ethnography is that the researcher acts as a major instrument in the research process (Silverman, 2013) as for example through the interview process or in an observational capacity. This involves performing a variety of researcher roles including conducting research, analysing the data and writing up the final report. Moreover, Lincoln and Guba (1994, p. 114) discuss the role of values in research and argue that Constructivism, “sees the inquirer as orchestra and the facilitator of the inquiry process”. By drawing upon these authors, it is apparent that my position at every stage of the research is an essential factor and that my role as a researcher is immersed within the study.

Murchison (2010, p. 13) captures how the researcher must use all their senses and through this they can “observe”, “listen” and immerse themselves within situations to gain a greater understanding. However, Murchison (2010, p. 15) believes that this also places a certain responsibility on the researcher to record, interpret and evaluate the data collected. Therefore, the responsibility is on the researcher to collect ‘extensive’ and ‘descriptive’ notes. Through this approach the researcher must aim to gather as much information as possible. Objectivity, ‘replicability’ and ‘validity’ (Gilbert, 1993) are key issues that may be viewed as challenging at times as through the ethnographic approach the researcher is personally involved. Based on this, Murchison (2010) offers various things that the researcher can do to improve this such as presenting “raw” research data and being as “transparent” as possible (Murchison, 2010, p. 15). May (2001) and Cohen et al. (2007) claim this positional stance implies that the researcher observes from a point where by they impose their ideals and beliefs and therefore the researcher can impact upon the collection of data.

Bell, Caplan and Karim, (2013) describe the 'gender-infected voices' that are not 'universal' but from a certain 'standpoint' and the idea of the researcher observing from a particular vantage point is also explored by May (2001) who suggests that the researcher brings their values, preconceived ideas to the research. This is seen to be an integral part of their ethnography and may be evident by their 'immersion' (Bryman, 2012) in the setting and subsequent data collection process. Additionally, Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen, (1989, p. 11) highlight that "while anthropology questions the status of the participant-observer, it spoke from the position of the dominant and thus the "other" and argues that "feminists speak from the position of the 'other'". It is important to recognise the limitations of the idea of being "immersed" as Masia-Lees et al.'s (1989) interpretation of the research as the "other" is supported by Bryman's interpretation. This proposes that the researcher can only observe but can never truly experience the separate life of the other. Through attempting to put myself in the shoes of the 'other' (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), as a researcher I have used the ethnographic accounts to gain a picture of the women's culture through the in-depth interviews.

In terms of subjectivity, as a qualitative researcher using an ethnographic approach, I may have been more personally involved. Whereas if I undertook a more quantitative based method, I may have been able to hold a more detached and a more 'unbiased' position (Bell, 2006). I addressed these points in my study, by acknowledging that the women are experts in their experiences and that their knowledge and voice is pertinent in the research. I endeavoured to make an environment that did not create an unbalanced power relationship between myself as the researcher and the women as participants.

Relationships in the interview context

Acker, Barry and Esseveld, (1991, p. 141) claim that a mutual and close relationship is crucial in feminist research. They exemplify this by claiming that “unless a relationship of trust is developed, we can have no confidence that our research on women’s lives and consciousness accurately represents what is significant to them in their everyday lives, and thus has validity in that sense”. This point is intrinsic to my research as the interviews were conducted in a face to face setting to enable the women to share their personal experiences captured through a self-reflected account of their journey through HE. The sensitive and empathetic nature of the context created by adopting this approach through a mutual exchange encouraged an awareness of the power relationships in interviewing.

Fendler (2005) presents the argument that everybody involved in the research including the participant and researcher can learn something new. In my study, this may have encouraged the women to reflect on aspects that have influenced their story such as motivational factors and encouraged myself as a researcher and woman who has experienced challenges to returning to HE to reflect on my own journey. Therefore, the ‘pedagogical value’ (Fendler, 2005) may be an element of shared commonality in relation to the challenges and benefits of being a mature woman in HE. Moreover, it may also support the idea of women sharing a space to express their experiences and views together. Furthermore, through the interview process, it may act as an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of returning to education and their views of studying and engaging with the academic world.

My influence in the research

Jagger (1989) emphasises that emotions and feelings are evident in any feminist research and that they must be a central part of the research process. This attributes to the data collected and determines how that data is understood, interpreted and analysed. The connections and judgements shaped by the values and norms of the researcher influence the steps and stages in the research process. Roberts (1991) explores the interplay between the gathering of data and search for knowledge alongside the lived experiences of individuals through the 'feminist' perspective and methodological and theoretical standpoints adopted. This demonstrates the inextricably linked 'lenses' (Silverman, 2013) that are used in research process.

In the instance of my study, the selection of prompts and themes organised in the semi-structured interviews, including the wording of questions, is inseparable to my ontology and is shaped by my emotions. Moreover, Jagger (1989) identifies that emotions are essential to an individual in many ways including how they perceive situations, events and the observations that they make. For example, Jagger (1989, p. 29) accentuates this by using observations as an example of how the researcher is not a passive recipient in the process but makes a series of interpretations "influenced by emotional attitudes" thus, choosing and construing the data. Miller, Birch, Mauthner & Jessop, (2012) stipulate that feminist researchers face several dilemmas including boundaries, interpretation of the data collected, the accessibility and sharing of data. These dilemmas must be considered by the researcher to make decisions on how information should be collected and shared with others and in what way.

This point is strengthened by Alvesson and Skoldberg, (2009, p.244) claiming that “emotion is an inevitable and important part of the researcher’s motivation, choice of orientation, and of the specific way in which the topic studied is handled”. In respect of my research, I needed to consider the arguments offered by Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) regarding the methodology and interviews as this required me to think about my ‘feelings’ and reflect on how this impacted the research. They claim these factors are pertinent to research and enhance the ‘value’ of the work. To be true to my research and reflect the women’s stories accurately, it is important to ensure any extracts are discussed in the context of the women’s stories and not influenced by my opinions and emotions with the intention of attempting to fit the findings into my own agenda.

Empowering participants

Throughout the five interviews, I hoped to communicate my ideas to the participants clearly to ensure that the women’s answers were not missed and that any issues talked about were fully understood. As an academic researcher, I hoped to further my educational understanding and uncover the experiences of the women in their worldview (Lincoln & Guba, 1994) of retuning to HE. The idea of reciprocity is explored by Golde (1970, p. 83) who states that the researcher can act as a “sympathetic listener” who can enable individuals to share their experiences and I feel listening and mutuality are fundamental to an ethical approach to research. It may also be argued that in the same way to ethnographic study, the women may not have been given the opportunity to present their stories or participate in research and “verbalise their feelings”. This offers a link between historical studies and my research as this reflects the reciprocity between the interviewer and the interviewee in a

mutual exchange by providing the forum for the women to tell their stories and give them a voice alongside listening attentively to what they would like to share.

3.9 Reliability and validity in qualitative research

In relation to validation, the data collected from the interviews was recorded to ensure an accurate account of the interviewees' responses thus ensuring validity and reliability (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Gilbert, (1993, p. 165) captures how "ethnography's general orientation to "naturalism" in sociology means that most observation is informed by a stance of "appreciation". This indicates that a researcher must strive to "see things" from the perspectives of the participants involved. However, Douglas (1976) recognises some of the difficulties interlinked with this approach as he recommends that there needs to be a series of 'procedures' including 'testing' and 'checking out' as he suggests that some members attempt to deceive any outsiders such as the researcher. This scepticism is critiqued by Gilbert (1993, p. 165) who suggests that this "hard-bitten" attitude can be obstructive to the research process and that this "tough -minded suspicion" is one which is in complete contrast to naturalism. Gibert (1993) assumes that Douglas' cynicism is disruptive to research and that it does not allow an understanding of contexts and their members through their perspectives. This viewpoint is supported by Fielding (1982) who suggests that this scepticism can prevent a discovery of the members of the group and what they do in their setting. However, Gilbert (1993, p. 165) develops this argument by summarising that Douglas ultimately attempts to create a "delicate balance between appreciation and being conned" and that this highlights the influence of the researcher in the research process and how this effect is a difficult issue to measure.

In addition to this, Bell et al. (2013) suggests that although there have been several writers such as women anthropologists and feminist scholars who have discussed the topic of gender and ethnography these have largely been dismissed. Bell et al. (2013) suggest that the most predominant reason why the issue of gender is so pertinent is because ethnographers gather data through fieldwork. This act requires establishing and building relationships to immerse them in another 'culture'. Bell et al. (2013) raise the question, to what extent can the ethnographer be separated from their participants.

For example, they state that although there may be a variety of characteristics that can be differences in for example, class, education and race, there may also be several marked similarities. Additionally, they argue that a researcher may aim to stress either "differences", "sameness" or both (Bell et al. 2013, p. 22). One of the implications of this point for my research was that I needed to recognise the influence that my position as a woman, mother and student at HE may have on my understandings of the challenges that the women may have faced. This needed to be in addition to not making any assumptions about their narratives in relation to my experiences.

One point to consider as mentioned earlier, is that the researcher observes from a vantage point (May, 2001) bringing their own preconceived ideas, values and experiences (Cohen et al. 2007) to the data collection. For example, I feel that I have a strong working-class background and believe that I have an interest in the area that I have researched and consequently may have become 'immersed' (Bryman, 2012) in the setting. Nevertheless, the impact of the researcher is noted from the onset of the research process (Denzin and Lincoln,

2011) through the context of the study, methods selected, chosen research questions and more generally in terms of the area explored. My impact in the research must be acknowledged as Crossan (2003, p. 48) argues that it is the “researcher’s experience, understanding of philosophy, and personal beliefs” that have an impact on the technique adopted, thus expelling other methods. The researcher must consider their epistemological and ontologically position (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995) that is prevalent in the research process.

3.10 Ethics

Before commencing the research, ethical approval was applied for and later granted from the University of Chester’s Ethics Committee (Appendix A). Following this, all participants received a letter outlining the aims and objectives of the study alongside a participant information sheet (Appendix B & C). All participants had an opportunity to raise any questions and clarify aspects that they were unsure about regarding this and had two weeks to reflect on their decision. Consent was obtained in written format (Appendix D) that was safely stored until the research was completed. Any documentation relating to the research was deleted once the final research report was completed.

The primary research consisted of five interviews that formed the basis of the data gathered that was recorded and then evaluated. The primary research was framed within an ethnographic framework, which was fully overt, as this was the most appropriate research method. Wellington (2000, p. 3) suggests that “ethical concerns should be at the forefront of

any research project and should continue through to the write up and dissemination stages” and due to this, before conducting each interview it was ensured that each woman understood about the interview and why it was being conducted.

Before conducting each interview, each woman was informed that at any time they could withdraw consent and that they may also ignore any questions that they were uncomfortable with answering. Furthermore, the honest and open approach adopted ensured confidentiality by using pseudonyms for both the women and institutions to be sensitive to all parties involved. As the participants were all adults it was easier to ensure that they fully understood the purpose of the research and how the information would be stored, shared and finally disseminated. Each woman was offered the choice of whether they wished to be taped during the interviews and the decision to use a tape recorder as a method of collecting data was based on this factor.

All the women gave consent and agreed to being recorded and understood that this data would be transcribed later. However, it was made clear that this agreement could be withdrawn at any time and this allowed the creation of a trusting environment where all the women could feel at ease and provided in-depth answers because of this. Confidentiality was emphasised for the answers given in the interviews and pseudonyms were used to ensure this and the women had no objections to this. Sensitivity was shown to all the women in the research and throughout the process of data collection and because of this the methods were selected per the ethical approaches undertaken.

The importance of anticipating any potential issues and dilemmas over the duration of the research is illustrated by Creswell (2013) who recommends that it is vital to do this before beginning the study. Consequently, if this is not adequately considered it may have a detrimental impact on all parties involved (Lee, 1993, Sieber & Stanley, 1988 and Homan, 1991). There were no perceived risks to me as the researcher or the women involved and throughout the research none of the women indicated that they were distressed or unhappy. In addition to this, as previously stated the women had the opportunity to withdraw from the research at any time by informing the lead researcher (myself-either by telephone, email or letter) and I reiterated this point throughout the research process. Although I felt that I had the skills to confidently listen to the women's views and opinions, I informed all the women that if they required emotional support they could be supported through other support systems (if appropriate). To my knowledge none of the women have felt that they needed to access any support because of their participation in the research.

Moreover, I actively referred throughout the research process to research guidance and associated documentation such as BERA (2011). I also adhered to the University of Chester's Health and Safety policy to inform my practice ensuring the health and safety of both the women and myself. The research was conducted in agreed venues to conduct the interviews thus ensuring confidentiality. On reflection, this choice of venue did cause the women to encounter some background noise and minor interruptions when others were close by such as in the next room. Although I had to consider issues about confidentiality, I did not encounter any significant difficulties and did not feel that confidentiality was breached.

To summarise, this section has provided an overview of the aims of the research and explored the focus of the study. It has discussed the research design and methods that have been used and scrutinised the ethnographical techniques that have been selected in the collection of data. Based on the research design and decisions made, the strengths and weaknesses of adopting an ethnographic qualitative study have been examined including the reliability and validity of this method. Additionally, the sample group was introduced by highlighting the connections of the women and exemplifying the importance of accessibility and establishing good relations between the researcher and participants. Finally, this section concludes by drawing attention to the ethical considerations of the study such as the series of steps undertaken from the onset of the research. This involved obtaining ethical approval to conduct the research through to ensuring that all participants were completely informed about the research in an open way. This was to ensure that consent was fully attained and that all participants were comfortable at all stages of the study including the recruitment stage, data collection, writing up of findings and completion of the thesis.

Chapter Four: *Meeting the participants.*

In this chapter each participant is introduced in a short vignette with a supplementary 'Overview of Participants' table that can be found in the appendix (E) section of the thesis.

4.1 *Introducing Lucy*

Lucy describes herself as a working class, forty-year-old mother of two older children who lives with her long-term partner and has been employed in the education and health sector for approximately seventeen years. During our conversations, Lucy shared her professional experiences and described how she had worked in a secondary school in several roles including being employed as a science technician and learning mentor. Lucy said that she had decided to return to education as she said that she felt that she did not see a future career in her setting and applied to become a children's nurse in 2008. Following studying on a three-year undergraduate nursing degree that she completed three years ago, she qualified as a children's nurse and has worked in the same hospital since qualifying. Throughout her time as a nurse, she told me that she has gained experience in various departments and positions including working in a Neonatal Care Unit, Intensive Care Unit and Cardiology department. Lucy has also acted as a Bed Manager coordinating services for patients.

4.2 Introducing Jill

Jill described herself as a working class, forty-year-old married mother with two older children who has worked in an educational establishment for over fifteen years before changing careers to work in an early intervention team in a Local Authority. Jill explained that she has had previous roles as an administrator, attendance officer, learning mentor and attendance and Common Assessment Framework (CAF) coordinator. Jill told me that she is currently employed within an early intervention team and maintains an overview of a multi-disciplinary team including health, police and social workers. Jill said that she did not achieve any GCSE qualifications at grade C or above at secondary school and decided to return to education to complete a foundation degree in Children in Young People Services with an additional top up course to enable her to gain a full BA Honours degree that she achieved a year ago.

4.3 Introducing Zoe

Zoe described herself as a working class, twenty-four-year-old single mother with a young child. Zoe said that she achieved seven GCSE qualifications at grade C and above at secondary school and attained a BTEC qualification in Health and Social Care with distinction. Zoe explained that she had a gap in her learning whilst working fulltime as a care assistant for four years before deciding to return to formal education. Zoe has predominantly worked in adult services for older people and progressed within a residential care home setting to become a senior care assistant. Zoe completed an undergraduate degree in adult nursing a year ago and specialised in mental health.

4.4 Introducing Sally

Sally described herself as a working class, fifty-year-old married mother with three older children who is a self-employed artist. Sally told me that she had achieved five O' Level qualifications at school at grade C and above and continued her education at sixth form and achieved three A Level qualifications. Through our conversations, Sally said that she had previously worked as a manager in a media advertisement company before starting her own business in children products. Sally returned to education following her children beginning fulltime schooling and deciding to pursue her dream to become an artist. Sally completed an undergraduate degree in Art four years ago.

4.5 Introducing Ruby

Ruby described herself as a working class, forty-one-year-old married mother with two young children who is currently caring fulltime at home for her family. Ruby recalled completing seven GCSE qualifications at grade C and above and said that she later achieved three A' Level qualifications before having a gap in her learning and beginning an undergraduate degree in Sports Science that she completed five years ago. Ruby said that she had previously been employed as a child minder, teaching assistant and school governor in her local primary school. Through our conversations, Ruby told me that she had decided to return to education when her two children started school fulltime.

Chapter Five: *Findings and Discussion*

I got to know Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally during our conversations together. We talked about the highs and lows of being a learner in HE. After these discussions, it became clear that particular themes were common to all of them in their experience of returning to HE. These themes are discussed in this chapter and this chapter consists of five sections. Each section presents a theme that has appeared to be influential to the woman's unique experiences of returning to study which I have attempted to capture in our conversations. The themes emerging, when I looked at the notes from the conversations, were women's motivations and aspirations, challenges to learning, networks of support and the value of learning communities including university life and experiences. Within each theme, I have included what Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally have said.

5.1 Motivations and aspirations

Prior to embarking on a nursing degree, Lucy shared that she had completed an Access to Science course at a local college and then started a HNC in Science through the Open University. However, Lucy explained that she did not complete this qualification due to financial issues and did not return to education for several years. Lucy said that she did not achieve any GCSE qualifications at a C grade or above at secondary school and thought that she did not reach her potential at that time. Furthermore, Lucy reflected on her experience and explained that she was not able to successfully learn and achieve until the point of HE. Lucy described her attitudes to learning and said that like her friends, she did not have an interest in her education at secondary school and said that she was preoccupied with other things such as her friendship group.

In Lucy's own words;

When I was younger I never took education seriously like the majority really...so when I became of an age I think about 22 or 24 and I started thinking that I need a set of qualifications that are going to get me through life.

From Lucy's comments, it gives the impression that she did not view education as a central part of her life until she had become older and her outlook changed. This links with Willis' (1977) study that illustrated how certain groups in society were not fully involved in their learning at the point of secondary school as they did not view education as important, achievable or relevant to them. It could be said that Lucy's perception of education also altered when she realised that she required formal qualifications and she appeared to be focused on the outcome rather than the experiences of university. It also seemed that at this

point, Lucy was anticipating her future and was looking forward to the perceived rewards of attaining qualifications that she said would get her *“through life”*. Subsequently, from Lucy’s comments it indicates that she viewed this step as investing in her future. These aspirations appeared to motivate Lucy to return to education and get the qualifications that she believed she needed. Another possible explanation for Lucy not thinking about continuing learning prior to this time may be that she had detached herself from the idea of academia (Bennett, Savage, Silva, Warde, Gayo-Cal & Wright, 2009) rather than feeling that she had been excluded. Thus, her assumptions about education and learning could have deterred her from engaging in learning process.

When Lucy talked about her motivations and aspirations, through our conversations it became clear that they were specific reasons for her deciding to return to education. For example, Lucy explained that she wanted to change her career path and enhance her prospects. She identified significant points in her life that had an impact on her immensely and motivated her to return to learning. Lucy said it was *“the realisation of just ticking over to survive”* that encouraged her to consider alternative options and stated; *“I just thought oh my god I can’t just do this forever...I need to go and do something that is interesting and pays better”*. This demonstrates that Marxism has an inextricably linked relationship with feminism (Coward, 1983) as for Lucy, the need to increase the value of her labour was an important factor.

Lucy told me that she felt that her ambitions had been a clear goal that encouraged her to remain focused throughout her studies. Through our discussions, Lucy shared that she had

other reasons for returning to education such as improving her circumstances and career progression driven by wanting to be “*interested*” in what she was doing. Lucy expressed that she recognised that her passion had diminished for the role that she was undertaking at that time in her life. This suggests that Lucy’s dissatisfaction with her situation had motivated her to revisit her studies and attempt to improve both her financial and personal circumstances.

Lucy’s account gives the impression that she may have had an obscured sense of identity in her existing state and that she desired to become more and wanted to develop her self-worth. Fuss (2013) analyses the impact of inequalities on identity from a Marxist feminist perspective and how a woman’s self-worth may be impacted by their subordination (Putnam Tong, 2013) oppressed through a capitalist system (Vogel, 2013).

Lucy shared her thoughts;

The journey ...for getting qualifications and that sense of achievement. I feel like it just made me a stronger person. I gained in confidence and everything and better self-esteem...it’s like I had proven...proven to myself...I could stand up there with the rest of them you know...that I could be clever in what I know and choose to do.

It may have been that returning to education was an opportunity to demonstrate her abilities which could suggest that she had previous inner doubt or was doubted by others. Subsequently, the idea of becoming more was a thought provoking concept as it may suggest that Lucy believed that her current position as a mother, partner and employee was not sufficient. Considering Fuss (2013) work on meritocracy and the capability of women, it

suggests that women are multidimensional and recognise the qualities that are necessary to function, compete and prosper in society. It may be that Lucy believed that she would be able to prove herself in some way by entering HE and showing her worth.

Grosz (1995) proposes that key differences imposed on men and women result in assumed characteristics that are applied to women such as femininity, empathy and being non-competitive. These perceived attributes including modesty, nurturing and supportive features are contrasted against men. Consequently, these restrictions can limit women through biological differences and naturalist systems that can confine them (Grosz, 1995). In relation to Lucy, her experiences may concur that her identity and expectations were forced upon her. Moreover, these assumed norms may have caused her to feel alienated from what she previously knew, thus unsettling her but also aspiring her to consider other opportunities. Therefore, these feelings may have influenced her actions and motivated her to enter HE.

Through our conversations, Jill shared her thoughts and said that she was “*excited*” at the prospect of returning to education and stated that it was not until following a series of inquiries to the university that she discovered that she would be able to study alongside fulltime employment. Jill recalled;

I was dead excited because I had made the decision so I rang them and then they described it, because what I was looking for was a course that would fit around work and my children, and I think when I rung up college and they said yeah, we can do it... and yes gave all the details, what it was and how much it was going to cost and what it entailed. I realised that I could fit it around what I was doing...yes...I was quite excited because I thought oh yeah god I am actually going to be a mature student... I'm going to be doing something that I did not see I would not be doing in a million years...in all

my lifetime I never thought I would see myself at university...like it was other people really so I thought I was quite chuffed thinking I've got... and I was quite chuffed telling other people that I was going to university.

For Jill, it seemed that being able to balance employment with her studies was an important factor in her decision to return to learning. This may illustrate how having a good network of support can influence decision making as it may be easier to manage these responsibilities with support. It also demonstrates how many women believe that they must be able to meet certain conditions including taking on additional tasks alongside their other obligations. For many women without a good support base, returning to learning may seem out of reach. This may also signify a change in themselves, their personal belief and would require them to feel able and confident to balance this additional pressure in addition to their lives.

Jill clarified the academic requirements and cost of the course to ensure she could “fit it in” to her circumstances and afford the tuition fees. Jill said that she was keen to share her news with others including her friends and family and was proud to be enrolling on a degree course. She recognised that had not predicated that there would be a point in her life when she would be studying at university. It may be that Jill could not initially see that she would continue her education to a higher-level due to class and gender-based assumptions (Warrington, 2005) that she had experienced in the past. Warrington (2005) proposed that aspirations and social inequality come from influences including ‘formal sources’ such as schools and further education providers. Other ‘informal sources’ including the family are also ‘mediated’ by factors including class, ethnicity and gender.

This may correspond with Jill's statement when she told me that entering HE was not what she thought that she would be doing in a "*million years*" which may be because of her previous influences from both informal and formal sources (Warrington, 2005). Consequently, these influential experiences may have encouraged Jill to think that this decision would have been unnecessary or unattainable. This attitude may exemplify that Jill felt that she had a perceived idea of what was expected of her that may be contextualised by her social class and family expectations. Allatt (1996) proposes that middle-class families presume that their children will attend university and that these 'assumptions' are typical for more affluent families where HE has usually been experienced by other family members. These contrasting positions indicate how the concept of "familial habitus" (Reay, David & Ball, 2005, p. 61) that refers to how families may have 'shared' (Reay, 1998; David et al., 2003) "perspectives, experiences and predispositions" (Reay et al., 2005, p. 61) may influence participation in HE and disadvantage students from poorer backgrounds.

Bourdieu (1984) captures how one of the consequences of familial habitus is that individuals gain assumptions based on what they think is acceptable for "people like us" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 64-5) that shapes their prospects. Jill declared that not in her "*lifetime*" would she have foreseen that this would be happening and told me that she was "*chuffed*" indicating that she was pleased with the steps that she had taken. Jill remarked on how she thought it was "*other people*" who participated in HE and did not view herself as someone who would be able to attend university. This point interlinks with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977; 1979) notion of how working-class students have hopes mediated and suggest that inequalities within entrance rates into university are representative of class inequalities in the labour market

with greater restrictions for students in a lower socioeconomic group. These restrictions may take the form of what Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, p. 229) refer to as a “restriction on choice” as students are selecting subjects such as the arts or science which they suggest must be ‘paid for’ by the limitations that they face.

It appears from Bourdieu and Passeron’s study, although somewhat dated, the suggestion that students from lower classes enter HE with restrictions imposed on their choice of course. This is through inherent assumptions based on their socioeconomic background and other aspects that may be still be applicable today. For example, it may be that Jill returned to HE based on the need that she perceived in relation to her employment at that time and that her choice of HE course was restricted because of her other commitments. Although, it may have also been because of her class-based expectations that it was “*other people*” who attended university. Thus, upholding the apparent academic hierarchy for certain more privileged groups in society.

Jill said that she had decided to return to education due a range of motivational factors and that one of the most significant reasons that motivated her to return to HE was the desire to challenge herself intellectually. Jill described feeling a moment of recognition when she became aware that she was one of the few professionals in her workplace who had not continued into formal education and gained an undergraduate degree or postgraduate qualification. This may suggest that previous inequalities from Jill’s early education had shaped further disparities in her experiences of the labour market (Blackburn & Jarmin, 1993). Additionally, she may have been disadvantaged for securing more lucrative positions in her

workplace. She highlighted that it was based on this point that she decided that she needed to return to studying and keep up with her colleagues so not to be left behind. It seemed that this was not only to be able to compete with them professionally, but also something else as Jill said that she was conscious that she was *“missing out”* in some way.

Jill described her working environment and stated that *“predominantly people... were quite highly educated”* and said that *“they all had postgraduate qualifications, or they had been to university”*. She elaborated on this point further and recalled that it was at this moment in her career that she decided to return to education. She reflected on this time in her life and said- *“I think the penny started dropping”* suggesting that she had realised that she wanted to gain a higher-level qualification. One of the explanations that Jill stated for returning to education in our discussions, was because she felt that in her current role and circumstances, she believed that she needed to develop her knowledge and skills to compete in her workplace.

Jill said that she had previously thought that HE was not a feasible option for her and explained that she had not engaged with education at secondary school. Jill told me that she felt that she was not expected to go onto HE by either her friends or family and may have felt ‘alienated’ because of this (Marx & Engels, 1972). Jill’s views link with Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) work that illustrates how choices about returning to education are often shaped by individual’s expectations. This is furthered by Mannay and Morgan’s (2013, p. 63) argument that proposes that working-class women are responsible for taking control of the home and feel that they must ensure a “respectable” and inevitably middle-class based

standard. This captures that whilst women may have limited choices at the point of secondary schooling they may also have other expectations that may limit their decision making at later stages of their life. It may suggest that they are taking control of the home because this is the only form of control that they have in their lives. Therefore, the domestic domain affords them some degree of power in an otherwise powerless life.

Although Jill recalled school as a happy experience, she said that she felt that when she reflected on her achievements at a later point in her life, she thought that she had wasted an opportunity to gain qualifications. Jill later returned to attain them as an adult. Jill talked about her attitude towards secondary school education before the interview commenced and said that she did not view education as important at school and enjoyed messing around with her friends to pass the time. It looked as if over time Jill's opinions about the importance of education had changed and a once fixed attitude about education and her relationship with it had evolved. This seemed to be from a point where she did not feel part of an academic world when she told me that she felt that she was "*missing out*" to wanting to enter a learning environment with the aim of being equal to her colleagues.

One explanation for Jill's earlier attitudes and assumptions about education may be rationalised by using a Bourdieurian perspective that illustrates that her views of "one's relationship to the world and one's place within it" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 474) may have shaped her understanding of the relevance of education. Consequently, Jill had recently returned to evening classes at college to improve her GCSE qualifications in mathematics and English Language and Jill explained that she had decided to do this with her childhood friend from

school after delaying this for several years. Jill described this period as a demanding time in her life.

Rose (1998) argues that New Labour's drive had seen an increase in the expectations placed on individuals to continue in education and Jill recognised through her experiences that she felt that her role required additional knowledge and skills. Furthermore, Jill stated that she had a disadvantage from some of her colleagues who had attained a HE qualification. In some respects, this resonates with New Labour Britain's rhetoric as Jill said that she wanted to improve her life and take charge of her learning. In relation to lifelong learning, through our conversations, Jill shared that she would want to continue with some form of education throughout her career. Jill's goal for fulfilment resonates with Rose (1998, p. 158) who exemplified how through lifelong learning the individual is to 'become whole' and shape their own destiny through empowerment and increased 'happiness'. This shift towards continued education was noted by Jill who had become increasingly aware that some of her friends had also returned to study for similar reasons.

Jill provided other reasons for wanting to return to HE such as a personal "*interest*", increasing her understanding and developing her "*knowledge and skills*". This was alongside a more general curiosity to find out about university life.

Jill recalled her reasons for returning to HE;

Interest really...I wanted to increase my knowledge and skills...I wanted to know about what this big uni malarkey was...I was working in an

environment where I'd say about ninety-five percent of people were university educated so I was like... let's have a go and see what all this cracks up to be really. Increasing my knowledge and just out of pure interest...never put the challenge to myself before... out of interest and a bit of like feeling not being getting left behind in terms of academia stuff.

This demonstrates that for Jill, a combination of personal and professional motivations encouraged her to return to study. In addition to this, she stated that if she could develop a greater awareness and understanding of current issues and how it would enable her to be more knowledgeable and confident in her role. Jill stated that in her “*professional occupation*” she was “*missing*” aspects due her limited “*knowledge and understanding about wider things*” and said that this “*impacted on [her] job*”. Regardless of if this was based purely on Jill’s own perception of the impact that her academic knowledge had on her understanding or whether this was a wider issue in her setting did not seem to matter for Jill as this was a real factor in her decision making.

It may be argued that Jill uses contemptuous language regarding HE and there may be underlying issues present. Also, Jill describes other matters with a degree of flippancy which may infer that she feels negativity towards HE. For example, she refers to university “*malarkey*” that suggests that she believes studying is nonsensical and is dismissive about why her colleagues had attended university. It may propose that she viewed achieving a university qualification as a way of attaining a qualification that her peers already held to prove to them that she was as capable as them. The tone of her language may indicate a reluctance to enter HE, juxtaposed with the fear or not “*getting left behind*”.

However, the positive impact of returning to education was shared on several occasions by Jill and she described a new desire to learn and said that she had developed a new “drive”. This was represented further when she defines her longing for learning as a “fire in my belly”. This had resulted in Jill stating that she was equipped to face “new challenges” and would not shy away from other educational opportunities. Through this new-found confidence, Jill said that she was able use the knowledge and skills learnt and put them into practice in the workplace. For example, Jill said that she could put this into use when working with children and young people and made her “more passionate” about the work that she was doing with families. It may be that Jill is securing knowledge in her field so that she can apply this effectively into her setting by using theory or analytical skills that she has developed. Subsequently, she may become more self-assured about working with children in certain ways and can defend her approaches more confidently.

Jill stated that one of the main enhancements in respects of her professional career, was based on how her role had evolved and how she has furthered her career through promotions and developments in her roles. Jill says;

It's helped me ...it's impacted in my work and I would not have got certain jobs if it had not been for that. I think that it raises awareness of a whole host of things really and certainly in my work life and practices and stuff and I've understood things a bit more around children's workforces and children's theory and strategies and policies and things like that so through work.

Jill said that it has given her a “different viewpoint” and said that this had given her an insight into “children's theory”. It seems evident that Jill misunderstands the significance of studying theory to apply to practice as she refers to how studying has helped her to increase her

knowledge and understanding of children's theory. In fact, the focus should be directed more at her development of understanding children and their needs contextualised by theory.

Throughout our discussions, Jill shared that these experiences have developed her as a person and changed her outlook. She told me that she has considerably changed because of her experiences and said that she will continue to study in the future. Per Bamber and Tett, (1999) and Reay, Crozier and Clayton, (2010) it may be that her norms and values have altered because of her experiences. Jill noted how her self-perception and identity has also transformed and she said she sees herself as a learner who wants to continue to study. Jill explains; *"I think that's who I am now...I've got a hunger to learn more and more"*. Overall, these comments suggest that Jill's experiences had impacted several aspects of her life and developed an awareness of studying.

Like Jill, Zoe told me about her experiences of HE to show what life was like for her during her time at university. Through our discussions, it became apparent that Zoe had decided to enrol on an undergraduate degree after deciding that she would like to become a mental health nurse. Zoe said that she felt that she had limited career progression in her role before starting university and hoped to improve both her and her son's *"life"*. It seemed that Zoe similarly to Lucy, had become dissatisfied with her job at that time. Zoe shared that she was seeking to return to learning following a gap when she had worked part-time and looked after her young child. It also emerged that she believed that returning to education may offer an opportunity to increase her financial prospects and undertake training that would enable her to work in health as a qualified nurse.

In Zoe's own words;

I did not want to be stuck in a dead-end job and I wanted my son to see that there is more to life than living on a minimum wage job, so for his life as well.

From our talks, I discovered that there were other reasons that Zoe believed had motivated her to enter HE. When asked, what had been the greatest motivating aspect of her decision to return to learning, she relied; *"my son"*. This typified that her choices had been based on considering others and that although she may have had individual factors that aspired her, she was clear that her son had been the main reason for her decisions.

It appears that Zoe's dissatisfaction with her circumstances and a possible sense of worthlessness may have influenced her motivations. Returning to education, may have brought a sense of hope and betterment where she could attempt to secure her liberation through education. This was like Lucy and Jill who were hoping for personal and professional fulfilment and that they viewed HE as an opportunity to transition into a world with greater prospects and mobility in the workplace. Rose (1998, p. 158) confers that individuals aim to "become whole, become what you want, become yourself" and through this they hope to enhance the "quality of [their] life". This suggests that for some of the women interviewed such as Zoe, Lucy and Ruby, they want to improve their knowledge, prospects and achieve greater financial rewards. This is alongside wanting to become more "whole" and may indicate their anticipation of achieving an improved sense of fulfilment both personally and professionally.

Through our conversations, Zoe discussed her circumstances and family life and said that before starting university she felt restricted in her role and “*stuck*” in a job where she was paid a low income with little “*development opportunities*”. She noted that this was one of the motivations to her deciding to return to education. Zoe told me that she wanted to have mobility within her career and that she had hoped to change both the circumstances that she and her son were in at that time and her job prospects. This may suggest that although professional development and progression within the workplace were important factors for Zoe, this was also alongside the larger aim of changing her situation. Moreover, Zoe explained that she had a young son and said that she that wanted to improve her prospects and act as a positive role model for her son so that he could envisage the potential opportunities in life when he was older. It was thought provoking that it seemed that Zoe viewed university to escape being “*stuck*” in a “*dead end job*” and that HE may be one way that she could move away from her current role. It appeared that Zoe saw returning to learning as a chance to change her circumstances in a positive way. Subsequently, this may have been an enabling decision for Zoe that would affect her own life and her son’s in the future.

It was interesting when I asked Zoe about her experiences of applying to university and the first contact that she made to the admission’s department. She recalled that one of the reasons why she had initially decided to contact university about beginning a course at HE was because her sister had been “*mithering*” her. She explained the reasoning behind taking the first steps to contact the admissions department by explaining that her “*sister had been mithering... so [she] rang and got a place*”. This suggests that Zoe had been encouraged to apply by her sister and evoked questions around her motivations and if she would have applied at that time if she had not had been encouraged by a family member. However, it

seems that following this contact she felt reassured as she described the interaction as “very nice” and stated that the staff had been “very friendly”. It may be that for Zoe although she had been motivated by hoping to improve her circumstances and act as a positive role model for her son she required some assistance from others to encourage her along the way.

When I asked Ruby, what had motivated and aspired her to complete her studies, in Ruby’s own words she replied; *“I just really wanted to get the grade”* and said that *“it was a focus thing”*. Ruby told me about her aspirations that she had when she was younger for her future and said that she had *“high expectations of things that [she] wanted to do in the future”*. She appeared to have a clear goal for what she wanted and stated; *“I had this like vision of wherever I wanted to be so that was it really”*.

In Ruby’s own words;

I have just got to do it and that is whether its studying or doing the dishes...it’s just if I’m going to do it...I’m going to...once I have got my mind on something I will just do it.

It appeared that the focus for Ruby was different than Lucy or Jill’s drives as she did not seem to lack confidence or self-esteem. This was strengthened by her further comments declaring; *“Once I have got my mind on something I will just do it”*. This may imply that Ruby prioritised achieving the qualification that she wanted to attain over other aspects of university life or that she did not have the same reservations about entering HE as some of the other women. Ruby presented a distinctive desire to achieve an academic qualification that she said she believed would enable her to secure a job in the future. Ruby’s wish to improve her

qualifications and chances of securing the job that she wanted in the future concurred with the findings from Kaye and Bates' (2017) study. This concluded that the main reason why undergraduate students decided to study a degree qualification was to improve their career prospects. Ruby said that she needed to “focus” to achieve the qualification that was required for a specific role she was aiming for as a physiotherapist.

This is captured in Ruby's comments below;

I finished my GCSEs and then I done A levels and then after I done my A levels...I was really interested in doing sport, so I took on sporty courses... I eventually...I wanted to get into physiotherapy... it was really...really demanding.

Ruby outlined her journey before entering university and she stated that she had had to re-sit an earlier GCSE Biology examination so that she would have the necessary grade for her chosen career and described this time in the following excerpt;

So, I didn't do well in my biology, so I wanted to make that better, so I redid biology GCSE it was kind of like making my qualifications a bit better to improve my chances of getting into physio... and so what did I do after that? I applied for physio in Liverpool and Manchester and I don't know somewhere quite local and didn't get in so that's when I applied for a clearing, so I thought I applied for biochemistry because I wanted to have like a science background and then maybe after the degree I could then apply for physio.

Through my conversations with Ruby, it seemed that she had overcome obstacles to her learning as she told me that she had not been accepted onto her first choice of degree course. However, Ruby told me that she had used the UCAS clearing system to explore other opportunities and decided to start an alternative qualification that was closely linked to her

previous choice. She also believed that this would be valuable to her application onto a physiotherapy course. Ruby demonstrates resilience and determination in her journey to HE and this illustrates the series of stages that she went through before entering HE.

Ruby's determination resonates with Thomas (2002) study that outlines the challenges such as managing employment whilst studying or being faced with significant student debts many mature students encounter. However, Thomas highlights that despite these difficulties a significant proportion of mature students continue with their studies. This appears to suggest that student retention can be impacted by external factors to some extent but that there are many students who show a high degree of determination to achieve their qualification. Through Ruby's account, even before commencing her studies she demonstrated how she overcame problems and was determined to apply, attend and finish her degree.

However, Ruby told me later in our conversations that she had funded her degree course through grants that she had received to cover her fees and essential living costs. Ruby explained that she would not have been able to afford the costs if she had had to pay her tuition costs. It was apparent from Ruby's comments that financial assistance was a deciding factor in her returning to education as this has enabled her to travel to and from university, meet her living costs and pay her tuition fees. Lucy recalls; *"I couldn't have afforded it. Not at all"* and explained; *"I even got out a student loan at the time to cover the cost of travel... so definitely not it just wouldn't have been an option... I wouldn't have had that opportunity"*. This demonstrates how the financial implications of returning to studying can prevent

students from entering HE (Callender & Jackson, 2004) and may have resulted in Ruby not applying for HE or withdrawing from her studies completely if she had not received support.

Through my conversations with Sally about her experiences of retuning to HE, she recalled significant apprehensions about returning to study and explained that this was partly due to her confidence. When asked if she could remember how she felt at that time, Sally said; *“Yeah. Oh god, yeah I can really remember it...I was very...I had very low confidence even though I had set up quite a good business really”*. Sally explained that despite setting up and running a successful business that she had developed independently following the births of her children, she still felt that she was not very self-assured. This was reflected in Sally’s comments; *“My confidence was at an all-time low, I didn’t have any self-esteem or anything”* and she remembered *“thinking what the hell am I doing here?”*. The idea of doing something that is not necessarily the norm amongst your social group, class or traditional role is highlighted by Edwards (1993) who argues that it can be difficult to go into HE, be accepted and manage the transition from mother to student. Edwards (1993) stresses that this based on fixed ideals about the role of a mother and the expectations placed on them about what it acceptable.

In addition to issues of low confidence, Sally said that she also had reservations about the ability to study whilst raising a family and Sally recalled confiding in her mother about her concerns. Sally told me; *“I told my mum how can I manage because I had three kids”* and she predicted even before beginning a course at university that this would be one area that may prove difficult in the future. Sally said that she believed that there were several challenges to

returning to education. Yet, she told me that she had decided to enrol on an undergraduate course despite her initial uncertainties. Reay et al. (2002, p. 12) propose that “women’s ability to immerse themselves in their studies” is hindered “until all their domestic and child care responsibilities have been discharged”. Sally’s considerations before entering HE, demonstrated some of the factors that may be influential on determining if a woman feels that they can return to learning and meet the challenges of studying.

It appears that Sally realised the implications of her actions before they had materialised and knew the demands that her decision to enter HE would have on herself, children, husband and wider family members such as her parents. From a Marxist feminist perspective, this captures how women may act as the gatekeeper in the home as they are responsible for the domestic tasks and how it is regulated and because of this may feel that although this may oppress them it also provides a domestic space they uphold and control. Therefore, Mannay and Morgan (2013) exemplify that women may restrict the interference of others and often struggle to let go of this area to take on other things.

Once starting her studies, Sally said that she had experienced several challenges that she described as very “*difficult*” and said that she had to work “*really late at night*” to ensure that she completed all the work on time. Sally summarised this by stating; “*I think that was the biggest challenge...its running your family with small children at the time and working.... people haven’t got the luxury*”. This resonates with Bradley’s (2016) work on fractured identities and illustrates how women’s lives are subject to disjuncture because of their split roles.

This point resonates with Alsop (2008) who stated that mature students often report that caring responsibilities are the main challenges for this group of students including managing caregiving roles in addition to having a balanced academic life. Alsop noted how although New Labour's policies highlight that learning should be embedded in a lifelong approach caring responsibilities are often overlooked. Alsop distinguished how care should be embedded and reorganised in a way that accommodates the need to balance care and study. Furthermore, Alsop adopts a feminist perspective to explore the need for HE to encompass an approach to mature students that supports them through a 'care culture' that is inclusive of student's caring commitments rather than the present way in which care is addressed. This point may support students like Sally who stated that she *"felt quite guilty"* about returning to education due to the impact that her choices would have on others.

Sally's comments about feelings of guilt capture that she felt that she was putting herself first to study and that initially this decision was unthinkable as she was married with small children. These feelings align with Beck (1992) work that highlights the psychological costs attached to putting oneself in the centre. Beck (1992, p. 136) explains that by positioning the "ego at its centre", it "opens up opportunity for action". However, Sally's feelings of guilt demonstrate that as a mother and wife in addition to being a mature female student can be problematic. For Sally, it was at the point when her children entered fulltime schooling that she felt that she needed to return to education. This motivated her to think about her options and stated; *"***** went to school...I suddenly thought...it suddenly kicked in that I had to do something with my life"*. Sally recalled feeling *"a bit dissatisfied"* and that this encouraged her

to think about her life at that time and where she felt she was and where she would like to be in the future.

It appears from Sally's remarks that it was not until she has accomplished the early childcare that she felt that she was relinquished from this duty. Therefore, she had fulfilled the maternal role and could dedicate time to other things. As previously mentioned, this interlinks with Reay et al.'s (2002) work that captures that it is at the point when women have been relieved of their duties that they felt able to commit themselves to their studies. They state that there are several features such as early educational experiences and qualifications and self-confidence that are influential on if non-traditional groups could enter HE such as lone mothers. Even though Sally was not a lone mother, it seemed that she had similar patterns of behaviour with Reay et al.'s (2002) findings. These concerns were also evident in other women's accounts including Zoe's reflections about being a lone mother and Lucy and Jill's experiences of managing competing demands.

To summarise, the emergent findings from the five women's stories indicate various reasons why they did not pursue entering university until a later stage in their lives. These explanations include having caring responsibilities including looking after their own children and not wanting to study alongside other roles including employment. Other reasons included not knowing what career avenue they wanted or realising that HE was a realistic opportunity for them. Another point evidenced in the findings is conceptual, the accounts suggest that the women were accepting their lot in the early years of adulthood including their role in the home or workplace. In fact, many of the women made good use of their time raising their

family, employment and other caring responsibilities and did not want or believe that they needed to study further until they were older. For example, it seemed that Jill rejected at the point of secondary education the dominant school culture in favour of spending time with her friends.

The point here is that Jill and other women actively rejected education in the early stages of their lives and dismissed its importance and because of this did not feel that entering HE was a goal or something that they felt that they wanted to do at that time. For many of the women, it was only at a later point in their lives did they feel that their outlook on education had changed in some way. This realisation manifested itself often in the workplace when they noticed others progressing in their role (e.g. Jill's account) or in contrast they felt that they were trapped in their position (e.g. Lucy's remarks). Subsequently, other women such as Sally shared through our discussions that they needed to return to education due to their dissatisfaction not only professionally but also on a personal level as she felt that her ability and dream to become an artist had not been reached. Consequently, this motivated Sally to embark on an art degree to fulfil her desire and fulfil her goals. De Beauvoir (2014) highlights how gaining economic independence is central to challenging a masculine ideology and is crucial for women to achieve independence. For Lucy, this may resonate with feelings of wanting to break free of her current professional and financial situation.

Many of interviews illustrated how the women expressed their need for additional training through further education and viewed attending university as a 'second chance' at education. Furthermore, wanting to improve their circumstances was a real motivating factor for the

women whether the decision was based on a professional, personal, financial or academic reason. This was highlighted in all the women's accounts as a motivating factor that spurred them on to complete their course of study and overcome any barriers to learning. For Lucy, it seemed that she believed that returning to education would enhance her life in many areas including improving her job prospects, achieving a greater salary, personal fulfilment and attaining an accredited higher qualification. Similarly, Jill noted reasons such as professional development and wanting to complete a qualification that she would be proud of were vital aspects in her decision making. Through the conversations that I had with Zoe, it appeared that she recognised the financial benefits of getting a professional qualification that would help her to secure a nursing job and improve her financial position. This was alongside the aim to do something that both her and other people such as her son would be proud of. Ruby also hoped that through studying she would be able to improve her academic qualifications by achieving a higher level of accomplishment.

5.2 Challenges to learning

Lucy was honest about the challenges to learning that she had tackled from the beginning of her journey and openly talked about her apprehensions of retuning to studying including her initial experiences of attending university. It appeared that Lucy became worried when she thought that there may be implications for her family. This seemed to be a significant point in her life that made her question her decisions but also made her reflect on what she wanted to accomplish. This may have required Lucy to think about her perception of learning, ideas of university life and the requirements of her course and how she could achieve her

qualification. Moreover, from a Marxist feminist standpoint Lucy may be seen to be challenging the expected structural perspective (Scott, 2014; Marx and Engels, 2001) and consequently impacted on the solidarity on the home.

I remember my first day when I was doing my nursing and I remember being stood there and thinking to myself what have I done? You know? I can't believe that I have got three years of hard work and study and everything...I'm going to be skint ...I've just walked away from a full-time job...oh my god I must be mad... I was just filled with fear at that moment.

Lucy examined her fears and anxieties and explored how she felt that she was “*coming out of [her] comfort zone*” It may be that Lucy believed that she was partaking in something that was not only new to her but was also something that was not the norm amongst her friends and family. Edwards (1993) proposes that this can make women feel that they are entering a world that is not expected of them or accepted by others. Likewise, Lucey, Melody and Walkerdine, (2003) portray the anxiety and conflict that a person may experience when they enter HE and these concerns may explain why Lucy stated that she was feeling that she was stepping out of her ‘comfort zone’ and into the unfamiliar. This could also have placed additional tensions on Lucy’s relationships with others including her friends and family (Stone & O’ Shea, 2013).

Lucy may have had some personal reservations about her abilities to perform at HE or been uncertain of the changes that taking this step may have on her identity. To explore this idea further, even though Lucy may have desired to become a nurse and alter her identity, she may have had concerns that this could result in her becoming someone else. This interlinks with Bradley (2016) work on ‘fractured identities’ as these changes may have transcended

across traditional class boundaries and gender expectations and may have resulted in Lucy losing a part of her known identity. Lucy's reflections on her experiences encapsulate these issues in the following extract;

It has been a roller coaster...because it's kind of like before I went to study, life was like what I knew and that was it...like the circle of friends that I had...but that all changed once I became more educated and once I did not have time for them... I lost friends along the way...but then I also realised who was important...it has been quite a journey really to go through and then it's like also splitting up with my partner and stuff like that because...growing up and wanting different things out of life...being educated teaches you different things and you get a different outlook now...on my life and my perspective is totally different now...to what it once was...so yeah...I think it changed my view of who my friends were and what my ideal partner was as well.

These early hesitations and later accounts may demonstrate the changes that Lucy believed she had experienced in her life and her worries about the impact that they had on others. This may have also brought to the forefront the pressures of managing responsibilities and entering the unknown. It is at this point, that clear links are evident between many of the women in Archer and Hutchings' (2001) study and Lucy and this highlights the uncertainties around transition to HE. It seemed that for Lucy and the women in the study, the home may have been a place where they have power and control, paradoxically, by breaking out from the domestic oppression into a place beyond the home, they are deliberately relinquishing a kind of power even if it was in the constraints of their household. Even though this unsettled Lucy, it appeared to give Lucy a glimpse of what is possible. Consequently, she was eager to enter HE, improve her possibilities of attaining a qualification and ultimately attempt to enhance her life.

Through Lucy's account, the desire to get a "*better*" way of life appeared to be exemplified on numerous occasions and she emphasised that it was "*the idea of knowing that you are going to get that better life*" that seemed to encourage her to complete her studies. It gives the impression that this belief was the "*motivational drive*" that urged her on. This resonates with Pascall and Cox's (1993) understandings of how aspirations can be one of the reasons why women decide to return to HE. Also, Lucy said that she was hoping to achieve an improved quality of life and that this was an important aspect on her decision to return to education. However, Lucy explained that these actions were also based on her disappointment of her previous experiences of education. Lucy recalled that when she was at secondary school, she had felt disengaged in the learning process. This dissatisfaction motivated her to revisit learning and reach a more positive outcome. Lucy recalled that she decided to make new choices about her education and that it was a crucial time when she could shape her life by "*choosing to do something*" that she felt was "*going to enhance [her] life and make it better*".

Lucy's desire to change and improve her life resonates with Mannay and Morgan's (2013, p. 69) work that explores how wanting to be "someone else" or doing something "somewhere else" is one reason that many students enter HE. This captures that for many mature students the idea of changing their circumstances is a motivating factor that can be prevalent at the beginning of their journey. This can help them to envisage a goal and encourage them to continue with their studies even when this change can present challenges, tensions or difficulties along the way. It gives the idea that some women re-enter the education system to overcome a sense of personal discontentment which is supported by Giles' (1990) claim

that there are numerous reasons why women choose to enter HE including improving their career, qualifications and prospects. Likewise, Pascall and Cox (1993) concur how many mature women are dissatisfied with married life and feel limited by their situations.

It appears that this decision-making process was empowering Lucy to change her life through choices which she had not been able to access in the past. In addition to this, the impact of motivations and individual decision making seemed to be significant in determining Lucy's journey and helping her to decide to embark on a course of study. Scanlon (2008) reflects upon this new perceived empowerment in his study which captured how many women decide to return to education after feeling that they want to take charge of their learning. This may be through furthering their career following a period in their life that has been heavily shaped by other responsibilities such as being a care giver. Lucy's remarks suggest that returning to education was a way of changing her circumstances and exploring other avenues that could help her to achieve the things that she wanted in life.

Lucy's "*desire to become a nurse*" was something that she returned to frequently and she appeared passionate about her choice of study and talked positively about her experiences of wanting to learn, train and fulfil her goal to become a nurse. She recalled the exact point when she decided to return to education and train to become a nurse and reaffirmed her sureness that this decision had been the best thing to do at that time frequently throughout her account. Additionally, when asked if she had any reservations about the decisions that she had made, she said that she did not and was quite definite in saying; "*it was the job I could see was going to be interesting and was going to pay enough money that I could live a life*

that I wanted to". These comments may suggest that Lucy was striving for a new financial freedom and the consequences that this may bring that may be different to the life that she is living now. Lucy's remarks may indicate that she was yearning for transcendence and wanting to escape the life that she was leading and steer her life in a direction that she believed would be "*better*" and help her to achieve all the outcomes that she wanted irrespective of if this was financially or personally motivated.

It may also signify a change in the original structure of Lucy's family from one which consisted of Lucy relying on a traditional male provider as the primary earner. This may have shifted towards her taking the decision to enter the labour market as a skilled professional instead of remaining in the home unpaid carer and fulfilling a domestic role (Barrett, 2014). This suggests that the notion of being a housewife, carer or mother is not enough and the urge to develop personally and professionally motivates women to return to education. Snyder-Hall (2010) exemplifies that Third Wave Feminism critiques the predicted gender roles and stereotypes and it appears that Lucy has attempted to break free from these assumed identities. This may also contradict with Maushart's (2001) positioning that identifies how women dominate the home and restrict the involvement of men. However, this may offer a description of the role that women have in the domestic domain, it does not represent the discontent that they may be feeling including a lack of progression outside the home environment.

The justification of her actions was clear and was reinforced throughout our conversations and although later she discussed some of the difficulties that she had faced, she remained clear that her motivation to become a nurse was more powerful and significant in her journey

than any other factors. This desire was central in her not only deciding to return to education but encouraging her to continue with her studies at challenging times. Lucy's story suggests that she was faced with many barriers to learning and she discussed the impact of financial issues as a challenge to her studying. Butler (2004) highlights how women are gendered, classed and face numerous challenges because of this and although for some students this may become too difficult to continue, Lucy effectively overcame them to complete her degree. Lucy talked about the difficulties of handling the everyday responsibilities of managing a home, working and supporting her family. Reay et al. (2002) identify a range of issues that can discourage women from entering HE and can prove problematic for women when moving into studying including coping with their domestic and caring responsibilities. From Lucy's accounts, it gives the impression that she personally experienced many of these difficulties and her account exemplifies some of the stresses that women are under (Lucey et al, 2003; Thacker & Novak, 1991).

Lucy had told me that she was living with her long-term partner for the duration of her studies, but she did not disclose the support that she had received from her partner. It appeared from Lucy's remarks that Lucy felt responsible for maintaining the standard of life that she had before entering HE. It also seemed that she was aware of her role in providing financially for her family in addition to completing all the unpaid labour in the home (Barrett, 2014). Lucy described the pressures that she felt in relation to the financial problems she experienced and stated that it was *"really hard"* to manage *"with a family and bills to pay and a house to run and a part-time job to do"*. Lucy's story also illustrated the issues faced by many mature students who are attempting study whilst fulfilling other roles and everyday jobs such

as caring responsibilities. She said that it had *“been a roller-coaster”* and remembered *“going into debt [and] being skint”*. Lucy summarised that she attempted to overcome her financial concerns by trying to remain focussed on her studies and recollected; *“in the present day when you are swamped with loads of work you have got to work, and you have got to find money for birthdays and Christmas and stuff like that”*. Through our conversations, Lucy highlighted the hardship and challenges that she confronted to complete her studies, manage other tasks, care for her family and achieve her qualification in nursing.

From the beginning of her studies, Lucy said that she had reservations that she had given up fulltime employment to return to education and was aware of the financial implications that her decisions had made on her family life. This demonstrates the complex decision making which women are faced with when deciding to start a fulltime qualification and this suggests that this is often a significant factor in their choices and can be a deterrent for many students considering HE. Reay (2003) summarises through the narratives of twelve working-class women that there are ‘risks’ and ‘costs’ attached to entering HE. Subsequently, although many of the women wanted to embark on a course at university, they had factors such as childcare, employment and domestic duties that were all a real consideration in their decision making. Reay’s (2003) understandings links with Lucy’s account in many aspects as she felt apprehensive about juggling her commitments in addition to fulfilling the requirements of fulltime study.

Lucy acknowledged that since completing her qualification, her financial position has now improved, and she said that she has benefited from the enhanced financial rewards of her

new role. This is captured by comments highlighting that she believed that she had become “*a better person*” and described how her family had “*benefitted from the financial side*” as she was now able to provide some financial assistance to them. Lucy described a sense of personal and professional achievement that had influenced her life and her children’s lives by improving how she felt about herself and how she was now able to provide for her family. In this instance, Lucy said that she believed that education had been an enabling factor enhancing her family’s finances and quality of life. This illustrates a Marxist feminist viewpoint that women are oppressed through capitalism and that Lucy attempted to free herself from this structure through improving her career and place in the labour market (Scott, 2014).

Lucy explained that she wanted to become a “*better person*” and this may indicate that she felt that she was a ‘lesser person’ before entering HE which may be based on her dissatisfaction about the job that she had before studying. It gives the impression that Lucy felt a sense of inferiority and her comments may illustrate more deeper feelings than merely a dissatisfaction of her job. It may also describe the transition from her traditional role as caregiver and partner to adopting a new title as a qualified professional and therefore experiencing “a shift from one identity to another” (Ecclestone, Biesta and Hughes, 2010, p. 6).

Lucy may have believed that her early position in a secondary school was a relatively unskilled position in comparison to the role that she later achieved as a skilled professional in the health service. This raises questions about who Lucy felt was judging her before she decided to return to education. It also questions if Lucy’s beliefs were based on a perceived inferiority

in the workplace and beyond or if it was based on her experiences at secondary school. Likewise, Lucy's longing for change may result in progression in terms of her knowledge, skills and qualifications but may evoke uncertainties about if this will make any differences to the person that she is. Therefore, Lucy will retain aspects of her life before studying such as her role as a partner, mother and daughter. Gouthro (2006. p. 11) recognises that many women have "conflicting goals" that comprise of attempting to achieve "independence" alongside striving to "develop a sense of identity".

Irrespective of the challenges faced by Lucy, she was clear in her account that there was a positive impact of returning to education and said that she was "*glad*" that she had completed her nursing degree. Lucy reiterated on several occasions that she had gained a sense of pride for achieving her qualification and this is highlighted by her comments;

I feel like it just made me a stronger person. I gained in confidence and everything and better self-esteem...cos it's like I had proven...proven to myself...I could stand up there with the rest of them you know.

Lucy generally portrayed a positive experience of returning to HE and talked about how this opportunity had shaped her life enormously. She told me that she felt that it had helped her to change her career path and stated that she had been appointed as a children's nurse in her local hospital. Lucy identified other benefits associated with her experiences such as the developments that she had noticed on a personal level such as improving her confidence and self-esteem. This point relates to the ideas discussed earlier about Lucy's desire to become a "*better person*". Lucy also said that she felt that she would embrace future changes and try out new things. Overall, throughout our conversations, Lucy expressed that her experiences

of HE had enabled her to see other options of learning that she could do in the future. Lucy talked about the possibility of returning to complete a postgraduate qualification and how she felt that she would be able to “survive” this experience. Moreover, Lucy said that she felt that the opportunities that she had encountered at university had equipped her with the skills to apply to other situations and that she had developed as a person. This point is demonstrated further by the extract below;

The benefits for me are now that I have grown as a person, I've got a better job, I've got a job now with a career route, you know it's very interesting... if I get bored in what I'm doing now, there's plenty of other things that I can go and get into as well...plus as well I know I can get into... as I proved to myself that I can do it and that I can deal with that level of stress and I can get through it and come out at the other side and I've reaped the benefits so when I'm ready to go and do a masters... I know I'll survive!

Lucy's remarks propose additional opportunities that are available to her in the future such as further learning at postgraduate level alongside a definitive “career route” and told me that her new professional qualification has enabled other possibilities and opportunities. Lucy detailed that she believes that wider skills such as perseverance and “stress” management have been developed through her experiences at HE. The fact that Lucy strived to become a “better person” is a key point as it suggests that she may have had people who have doubted her and raises questions as to why she may have doubted herself.

Jill also shared the challenges that she had encountered when she detailed her journey through education and described how she managed to “juggle” work and study. In Jill's own words;

Juggling work and then home life and everything was and how it all impacts really ...so yeah...it was hard. ...driving around the M62 (laughs) ten minutes before I should have been in uni...at my course... eating a buttie, drinking a coke and trying to drive the car at the same time and then realising that I have left my uni books in the house (laughs) and forgetting to bring money to pay for my fifty-pound library bill... that I kept leaving...leaving books in Prague when I'd been away for weekends and I had left under beds and forgot to bring them back so I'd say...

Mannay and Morgan (2013), discuss the challenges of returning to education alongside the pressures of balancing numerous roles and responsibilities. This is also captured by Jill's account of managing working fulltime, studying and having a family. When asked about the challenges faced, Jill recalled; *"juggling", "dashing out of [her] job", "rushing around and juggling work and then juggling the kids"*. Jill had me that she was married during our conversations, but she did not say if her husband had contributed to her studies including sharing domestic tasks or caring responsibilities. Jill referred to the support that she had received from her parents but did not comment on the role that her husband had played in her experiences or if they had had a positive or negative impact.

However, through our earlier conversations, Jill had stated that her husband was a shift worker and frequently returned home late at night and said that this placed much of the caring, shopping, cooking and other tasks on her. This links with a Marxist feminist viewpoint as it demonstrates that domestic chores and labour demands continue to be required in the home whilst studying (Brines, 1994) and Benston (1969) claims that the oppression of women can only be changed by a transformation of capitalism. Jill outlined her work commitments and said that she also worked fulltime alongside taking the children to school and organised the family's social activities and other events. Jill's experiences seem to correspond with

Milburn's (2012) work that illustrates how education providers need to adopt an all-inclusive approach when supporting students by taking into consideration the multifaceted role that they have outside their studies.

By adopting a Marxist feminist perspective, it may show the situational barriers women face. Mark-Lawson and Witz, (1988) highlight the unsettlement that occurs when a woman decides to change her role from primarily being a care giver or homemaker and enter employment. It may be argued that the same effects of disturbing the perceived unity of the traditional role as mother and housewife may be applicable when a woman decides to return to learning (Merrill, 2015). For instance, Jill identified the additional burdens that she faced when entering HE such as the practicalities of dedicating her time and efforts to the competing demands in and outside the home. This exemplified the stresses placed on her and she described this time as *"quite hard"*. Alongside managing her responsibilities during this time, Jill stated that she had found this time an emotional period of her life. Jill stated; *"I felt a bit stressed"* and she told me that it had *"challenged"* her. Jill's commentaries clearly demonstrate the issues faced in relation to how Jill managed the pressures of being a mature student. This suggests that this stress may have involved juggling time and commitments but could have also been other aspects underneath the surface making her feel uncomfortable. This could have included experiencing difference, change, growth and assurance in addition to other family members feeling less important as their relative entered HE.

Jill indicated that she had also struggled with organisational skills and managing her time and described herself as being *"a bit disorganised"* and because of this was *"rushing all of the*

time". Jill stated that this was a busy period in her life and although she managed to progress in her studies, Jill said that she recognised the strain on her personal life and free time and these concerns are evidenced by other students in studies such as O'Shea and Stone (2013). This point also interlinks with Henry and Farley (2004) who note the importance of time management and organisation as crucial skills that are required when studying at university as a mature student. They highlight how students must be able to multi-task to meet the demands of studying at HE. Jill felt that skills such as organisation and time management were two areas that she had developed during her studies and stated that she improved planning and preparation.

Jill reflects on her way of organising;

I have sort of tried to improve my organisational skills really and thinking a bit more...sort of planning ahead...and not rushing so much because I think...if I rush I am missing out on learning as well. So, yeah...more preparation and stuff prioritising my work now.

Jill's experiences resonate with other mature students' accounts including thirty-two non-traditional students whose journeys are illustrated through the stories of three mature ethnic minority students preparing to enter HE. Bowl's (2001) research indicates that even at the point of completing access courses through to enabling students onto HE courses of study they are met with several barriers to learning. This includes time management issues and more generally the pressures of studying whilst having a family. This is also supported by O'Shea and Stone's (2013) work through two qualitative studies that identifies the challenges confronted by mature students such as managing their various commitments in the home alongside work responsibilities whilst studying. The students in this research had entered

university as non-traditional students and mature learners who had difficulties with certain areas. This included time management, finances and the feelings they associated with studying such as feelings of guilt. Subsequently, other studies such as Fragaso, Gonsalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro and Quintas (2013) capture how these issues are more apparent for mature women and more specifically in relation to time management.

During our conversations, it appeared that one of the main challenges of returning to education for Zoe was financial difficulties;

...the loans and bursaries don't pay very well and it's hard to still pay all of your bills as well as the travel that costs a lot...like £40 a week on bus fares it's hard to make ends meet on a student loan.

Zoe said that she had struggled to manage continuing with her studies with a young child because of the cost of studying at university. Zoe had later informed me shortly after the interview that she was a single parent who was living in rented accommodation and that this had placed a lot of pressure on her financially. Hinton-Smith (2015) illustrates how lone mothers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in HE as they face increased challenges in comparison to other groups. This includes suffering financial hardships and reduced participatory experiences because of their caring responsibilities and financial constraints. Their study considered the rewards and risks associated with entering HE and presented an exploration into how factors such as increased tuition fees and a decrease in social welfare are influential on lone mother's experiences of HE. These findings seem to link with Zoe's experiences and exemplify the ongoing challenges and considerations met by lone mothers that are epitomised by the risks and benefits that remaining in education involves.

The financial pressures and challenges that mature students face when returning to study is one reason highlighted by Jones (2008) that students do not complete their studies. These challenging circumstances can prove incomprehensible for some students to overcome and can result in them leaving their course. Through a Marxist feminist perspective, Barrett (2014) explains how women are placed under substantial stresses because of their responsibilities in the home and that their unpaid labour is a valued commodity that men ultimately benefit from.

Additionally, Fraiser (1995) argues that material and cultural inequalities can be influential on educational achievement. Zoe experienced challenges to her studies that may have had a more negative impact than other students who may have met less hardships such as middle-class students or those without parental responsibilities. This highlights the importance of adopting a Marxist feminist viewpoint as it enables an understanding of the relations, hardships and challenges that women face (Tong, 2013). Benston (1988) offers an analysis through her Marxist feminist study that illustrates the importance of the role of women in the home and the negative implications that this can have on their lives.

It seemed that Zoe succeeded despite the financial challenges that Zoe faced and she generally talked relatively positively about her time at university and about the impact of returning to education and learning. This is indicated when she says that she had gained a *“better understanding”* and had increased her *“knowledge”*. Zoe discussed the impact of her experiences and compared her knowledge in the area that she had studied as more advanced than other colleagues in her current workplace and other *“people who have not done the*

course". Moreover, Zoe said that she felt that her confidence and self-esteem had developed, and she told me that it had increased her *"self-worth"*. Zoe exemplified this by expressing how it had *"increased [her] confidence of meeting new people...learning new things and going new places"* and generally seemed to have increased her confidence relating to others. This may suggest that for Zoe, the benefits of education superseded the difficulties encountered. Subsequently, for Zoe, there appears to be a calculated decision for returning to education by balancing the positive and negative aspects of studying throughout her time in education.

Zoe's experiences may correspond with Haggard's (1963) work that suggest that participating in learning can change a person's behaviour and although this work is somewhat dated, the principles illustrated still relate to forms of learning today. Additionally, for Zoe it increased her knowledge and skills that she could apply in the workplace. It also seemed to improve her confidence as she stated that she had become more self-assured about her abilities including interacting with others and travelling independently. Therefore, it appears that a change occurred through learning (Knowles, Holon & Swanson, 2005) that had been influential on Zoe's life. This resulted in her being able to engage in the learning process more actively and develop areas of her life that she acknowledged had been limited before.

In Sally's own words she reflected on her time at university and the challenges to learning that she encountered, and she thought that *"the biggest challenge"* was *"running your family with small children at the time and working"*. Sally explained that *"people haven't got the luxury"* of studying without balancing other roles such as caring and employment and from a Marxist feminist perspective this may link with Walker's (1995) idea that women have

restricted opportunities. It appears that Sally is deflecting an angst towards others who do not have the same level of obligations that she had or other students with responsibilities have whilst studying. It also seems that she was directing her remarks toward those who did not have the same pressures both financially or emotionally and that people in her situation do not have the “*luxury*” of taking this opportunity for granted. Even though Sally told me that she had received support from her partner and family to return to education and said that they had helped her by taking over chores within the home and other tasks she was very open and honest about the difficulties that she had faced. Sally captured her emotional state at that time by recalling; “*I felt quite guilty*”.

According to Sally, one of the consequences of choosing to return to education was that she said that she had felt “*guilty*” about dedicating some of her time to studying and that this was taking that time away from her other roles as a mother, wife and daughter. This suggests that the emotional cost (Bamber, Galloway & Tett, 2006) of returning to learning was quite high for Sally and her feelings of guilt epitomised the additional strain that she believed that her family were experiencing due to her decision to study and dedicate her time to supplementary things outside the home. Bamber et al. (2006) propose that working-class students may face a more ‘costly’ and ‘risky’ experience than those in a higher socioeconomic group and this ‘cost’ and ‘risk’ may be exemplified for Sally with the combination of financial implications, demands on time and emotional aspects of participating in HE. Sally stated that she had realised early on in her studies that she was required to juggle numerous roles within the home and her employment position alongside studying. This relates to Oakley’s (1972) work that suggest that women’s roles are constructed by gender and are allocated in a way

that shapes their behaviours and identity. Sally expressed that dealing with these responsibilities was the *“biggest challenge”* that she tackled and explained that she had a young family in addition to working around her studies and felt that she could not have exclusively studied at that time in her life and had to manage their various strains whilst learning. Therefore, through the process of gendering (Butler, 1990; De Beauvoir, 1972) women’s lives are constructed.

It was thought provoking when Sally shared that she believed that mature students need to be able to cope with all their other responsibilities alongside studying to be able to return to learning. This appeared to be a conditional requirement for Sally that is also discussed by Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal and Kilkey (2008). They present how mature students must be able to manage these competing stresses as a prerequisite of re-entering education and it seemed that Sally felt that she needed to efficiently do this to justify her actions. She referred to the support that she received from both her mother and husband frequently throughout her narrative and stressed that this had been a vital part of her journey that inevitably enabled her to manage the different responsibilities that she had. For Sally, it looks as if the challenges to learning that she experienced had been overcome with the help and support from her family.

Overall, the women took account of the challenges that returning to study had on their lives by recognising their new role as a student alongside balancing other errands at the same time. Sally captured first hand the daily efforts of studying, working and *“running” a “family with small children”*. Dealing with other commitments and responsibilities appeared to be the

perceived norm for Sally and she explained that for many women returning to HE they have not got the “*luxury*” of having an exclusive student experience focused on learning without having to fulfil employment. Sally openly declared that she felt “*quite guilty*” about returning to learning and it seemed like one of the conditions of her returning to education was that life would need to continue as normal as far as possible for her to defend her actions and continue with her studies.

At times, this proved particularly difficult for some of the women who admitted they felt the strain on their personal lives in the form of less time for themselves and less time to socialise with friends and family. This also caused further challenges such as adapting to becoming a student and navigating the journey to and from university independently and organising their workload and time. For Ruby, she expressed that mastering traveling alone was one of the most challenging aspects of student life whereas Jill recalled that she struggled to organise her studies and balance her workload in addition to her other commitments. Young (1990) suggests that patriarchy oppresses women and claims that it is through this patriarchal culture that women’s lives are formed. Ruby captured how she needed to become more independent such as travelling alone, and this may be one example of how she has challenged the oppression that may have previously inhibited her.

Jill recalled it being “*really hard with a family... bills to pay.... a house to run and a part-time job*” and described this time as feeling like she was on a “*roller-coaster*”. This interlinked with Lucy’s experiences of financial hardships highlighted through the fear of “*debt*” that she found “*hard*”. In the same way, Zoe explained that financial pressures had proved challenging

and she explained that her *"loans and bursaries"* had not been enough for her to *"make ends meet"*. This suggests that she had struggled and that this had a negative impact on her experiences at HE. These tensions were also represented in Jill's account when she described feelings of being *"stressed"*, *"challenged"* when she *"juggled"* her work and home that she also found *"hard"*. For Ruby, the practicalities of travelling independently to and from university proved to be a demanding task and she cited this as being the most challenging aspect of studying at HE.

Even though the women's accounts were separate and detailed to a time and space in their lives that was totally unique to them, they shared similarities that appeared to be commonalities amongst the group. These unities illustrate the obstacles that women encounter at the different stages of their journey from deciding to enter education again, once at university and following the completion of their course. Ruby and Zoe both said that they would not consider embarking on a further course in the future and explained that this was because of the financial cost of studying. For others including Lucy and Sally, they told me that although they recognised the financial commitment that further studying would involve but emphasised that this was not a deterrent. They viewed further study as a possible area for development in the future as Lucy and Sally stated that they both hoped to complete a Postgraduate degree.

In relation to this study, the impact of social class and gender were predominant issues within the women's accounts highlighting how accessibility, aspirations, early educational experiences, caring responsibilities and financial pressures had all been significant features

on their voyage through the HE system. In addition to this, many women's previous encounters with learning, impact of family support and other characteristics have had both a negative and positive influence on their experiences. This has been influential at all stages of their journey, from the onset of their studies by shaping their decision making when selecting a course of study, through to defining if they could successfully complete their course. Various widening participation initiatives aimed to increase the number of non-traditional students have been implemented to move away from an elitist system of education. However, Reay (1998) highlights through her case study of ten applicants to HE that in reality, certain groups including mature students have several complexities including social class, gender and ethnicity that are significant.

5.3 Networks of support

Lucy shared in our conversations that she thinks that one of the main enabling factors that helped her to return to education and successfully achieve her nursing qualification was the support that she received from her parents. Lucy said that she was supported by her parents who helped her to reach her aspirations and become a nurse. She clarified that when it was becoming difficult to continue, her parents motivated her to carry on with her studies and aided her to do so. Throughout her time at university, Lucy said that her parents had acted as a consistent support network and that this was a real motivation for her to complete her studies.

Lucy recollected;

Mum and dad who have been so supportive all the way through... they have always given me a helping hand whether that has been financially...whether that's been childcare...whether that's been to take us on holiday.

Lucy stated that even at incredibly trying times during her studying, she could draw upon her parents for emotional and financial help. Lucy remembered occasions when she felt that she was finding things particularly difficult to manage and she recalled her mother taking her and the children on holiday to give them all a break to recuperate. As stated before, Lucy did not refer to her long-term partner or the impact that this had, and it may be that Lucy and her mother had undertaken most the caring roles within the family.

Whilst Johnson and Ransom (1983) and Craft, Raynor and Cohen's (1967) work may be somewhat dated, their theory based on the importance of parental interests is still applicable. For Lucy, the fact that her parents were actively supporting and encouraging her throughout her studies proved that they were investing in her learning even at the point of HE. Overall, Lucy talked about the impact of her parents support in a positive way and felt that this was one of the most important things that had helped her during her time at university. Lucy's interpretation of her experiences, highlighted that parental backing is an important source of support irrelevant of the individual's age and that this was a vital aspect in her journey.

In addition to wanting to improve her financial position, Lucy also desired to boost her professional development and progress in her workplace, including being considered for more senior roles. Lucy remembered a conversation that had taken place between her and I

when we had worked together in an educational setting and said that there was “no career progression” in her previous role and outlined the perceived “limitations of the job”. This is captured in the extract between Lucy and I and she described a lack of a clear advancement in her employment;

I remember thinking I should go and do my nursing and I remember having that conversation with you... (laughs) that was it... that was my turning point of thinking- do you know what, yeah, I'm going to get back into it.

Mobility in the workplace and having the opportunity to develop on many levels including achieving career progression in terms of roles and responsibilities was also an area identified in the literature review as a motivational factor for many mature women returning to study. However, for Zoe, it appeared that she was supported from the onset of her studies from her wider family and she shared through our conversations that she was a single parent with one young son. Zoe had told me before the interview began that her mother had been caring for her son and supporting him to get him to and from school. Zoe said that she had been a great source of support. On reflection, I do not feel that her account truly illustrated the assistance that she had received from her mother or wider family.

Similarity to Lucy, Jill shared during our conversations that her family had been a great source of support helping her back to education and assisting her with her learning. She felt that her parents had been her main source of encouragement. Throughout our conversations, Jill did not discuss her husband's involvement in her studies and one possible explanation for this may be that Jill's husband's support was not as influential in her journey through education as the support that she had received from others. Jill stated that her friends had also

supported her from helping motivate her to return to education through to encouraging her to persevere during her studies. This illustrates that support may be accessed through several means including financial backing, peer support and guidance through to more practical based assistance such as helping with tasks in the home or caring for children. However, one important point that was raised through our conversations was that there appeared to be a need for support for Jill to be able return to learning. One argument presented by Brah and Phoenix, (2013) and Allen and Baber, (1992) is that challenges may be because of class or gender issues. For example, in Jill's journey she was confronted with issues around her roles as a woman, whereas Lucy exemplified the financial issues that she experienced.

Furthermore, support has been identified by Thacker and Novak's (1991) work as central and was also highlighted in several of their interviews as a vital element in succeeding. Therefore, the amount of help that a student receives can help shape their experiences of university and may help or hinder their studies. For example, Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010, p. 12) exemplify how one student's experience of receiving financial assistance from her grandfather's inheritance had enabled her to stop working and concentrate more on her studies. She recollects, "I was working so many hours and I got quite low grades ... then I got an inheritance from my granddad so if it hadn't been for that I'd still be working full-time hours. I mean my marks went right up because I used to get like 40s, 50s and stuff like that and all my marks last semester were firsts". The student also identified a link between the demands of work and caring responsibilities on her studies and said that she found it "impossible" working fulltime, looking after her family and studying. She stated; "I just wasn't going to reach my potential". Therefore, in this instance. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2010)

make a connection between the stresses placed on a student and how this affects their attainment.

Throughout Ruby's interview she stated on several occasions that one of the main challenges of returning to education was the travel to university. She said that she had to adjust to daily commuting as this was something that she had not done before attending university. For Ruby, it seemed that the journey to and from university had an impact on her life as she indicated through our conversations that she had adapted to the travel as this was something that she had not had to do independently before starting her degree course. It appeared to be a big change for Ruby from participating in learning that was very close to her home to stepping out into a new environment where she was responsible for planning her arrangements and travelling independently. Ruby told me in our later conversations that she had moved away from a familiar small industrial town setting where she lived for several years to studying in a busy city environment that was a lot more populated, fast paced and geographically larger. This could suggest that for some students going to university irrespective of if they are residing on campus or commuting daily, are often required to develop more independent skills than they had before. This may include prior planning and preparation to navigate around unfamiliar surrounding on their own.

It appears that there are underlying issues here such as women attempting to reject an existing state of being by wanting to reinvent themselves and adopt a different identity. However, it appears that this move is not without its challenges as the women have had to adapt to their new expectations and surroundings. This cultural shift from their known roles

as a wife, partner or care giver to a new persona as a student has drawn out anxieties about what these new experiences would entail. Consequently, becoming more independent in terms of travelling and navigating the journey to HE may have been less problematic than the challenges that the women have met in relation to the emotional changes that they have experienced.

Sally told me that her mother had suggested a course for her to study and this illustrates how for Sally, parental involvement may have influenced her choices of HE. Tysome, (2004, p. 1) suggests that “parents are having an increased impact on how candidates choose courses and institutions” and it seems that Sally’s comments support this argument. Additionally, Sally’s mother and parental perspectives may have influenced her choices as indicated by her comments;

*My mum was actually saying you know at *** College this was this foundation degree and why didn't I try and go for it...and that's how it all started.*

My mum pushing me all the way and saying go for it...go for it you know you are good enough

Mum was just brilliant and really helped me...she was absolutely fantastic

When I asked Sally to tell me who had been her main source of support throughout her studies she replied; “*all of my family*” and this suggests that she had a wide range of help from her family. This support was highlighted by Sally throughout our conversations and she told me that her mother had encouraged her to return to HE and she recalled an event when her mother had recommended a course and reassured her that she was “*good enough*” to do it.

The impact of parental support is evidenced by Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) and Bourdieu (1986) and this interlinks with Sally's experiences as she said that her mother had told her that she should "*go for it*" and reassured her that she was "*good enough*". This reassurance seemed to be a supporting factor in her journey and she said that her mum had initiated her studies by encouraging her to apply and then accept her place at university through to helping her think about her potential. This is demonstrated when Sally recalled that her mum had asked her why she had not entered HE and said that she should "*go for it*". It may be that Sally was waiting for encouragement or approval from her family before returning to study based on Sally's perception of her capabilities. The support and inspiration that she had received emerged to be a significant factor in her experiences and this assents with Pascall and Cox's (1993) stance that students who have an effective support system that encourages, and aids can be a real enabling factor in their journey.

To recap, networks of support proved to be influential on the success of the women's studies as the impact of support both financial and emotional appeared to have a positive impact on the women's experiences of education. In addition to this, the women also addressed the influence of factors such as organisational skills and time management because although these factors have not been the most influential, certain accounts proved that they have been an important part of their experiences of HE. In relation to assisting the women to meet the challenges of HE, family support such as childminding was heavily discussed in the interviews including its impact on how the women could utilise the assistance they received from their family to meet the requirements of their course and fulfil other obligations.

It appeared that for both Lucy and Jill, they managed to cope with their return to education because they had been given support from other family members, often their own mothers. Lucy recalled that her parents had provided her with support whilst Jill illustrated the support that she had received from “*family and friends*”. Sally commented on how her mother had been a key influence in her decision to return to learning as she had encouraged her to apply and reassured her that she would be able to do it by offering practical support with the children and her business. Sally also cited her husband and children as supportive of her studies. This suggests that this support from partner or partner is somehow the way that these women have been able to justify returning to learning as they have gained the approval and support from their parents, partner or other influential family members including their children. It would be interesting to explore this further to discover if the same level of consideration would be required for a male partner wanting to return to study, because the additional burden of parenting or fulfilling domestic tasks would be carried by the female partner.

5.4 Learning community

Lucy shared her thoughts about other students on her course and said that before she started university she had a fixed idea about what the other people on her course would be like. She described how she believed that they would be “*boffins*” and “*clever people*” which suggest that she perceived herself to be less able in some way. Lucy recollects;

I did think it was going to be like boffins...like really sorts of clever people an...then when I got there and there was people there from all walks of life...you know...all there for different reasons...it became really interesting as well as getting to know other students and stuff and what their journey was and why they were there.

Once at university, it seemed that she realised that she shared comparable features with other students including being a parent, similar motivations for returning to learning and she noticed that they had also acquired some *“life experience”*. It appeared that this reassured Lucy and helped her to feel that she fitted in amongst fellow students. Lucy told me that she enjoyed the interactions that she had during her time studying and said that she could learn about other students’ *“journey”* to HE alongside their individual reasons for studying.

Zoe described her time at university as a *“whole new world”* compared to what she had been used to before beginning her studies and stated that she was stepping out into a world that was unfamiliar to her and described feeling very stressed. She described her early experiences of attending university as *“petrifying”* and *“very scary”* and summarised the step up from college to university life as *“totally different”*. This was evidenced by her description of different systems, structures and expectations of students exemplified by her comments;

It was totally different from college...there was like a massive gap and you got loads of different things to do all of the time and you are left to it.

Zoe’s comments may highlight how students may find returning to learning a stressful time for a variety of reasons such as being confronted with new learning experiences challenging their previous ideas. This may be based on their self-perception and identity resulting in students feeling that they are entering a *“whole new world”* as suggested by Zoe. This *“new world”* may be constructed of aspects that they are unaccustomed to including travelling, teaching methods, general setting and the requirements of the course. Krause (2006, p. 1) suggests that HE and the curriculum may be *“a challenge to one's identity and a threat to familiar ways of knowing and doing”*. It seemed that these changes affected Zoe as she noted

marked differences of learning styles and expectations as a learner from those she had previously encountered in school and college. For some students, according to Thomas (2002) these differences prove to be too unfamiliar and result in them withdrawing from their studies prematurely.

This may be because of dissimilarities in cultures and practices (Bamber et al. 2006) and Henry and Farley (2004) recognise that alongside cultural changes, students may experience advancements in teaching styles from their prior experiences of learning. Subsequently, they are required to adapt to new cultures by actively engaging in these developments to meet the requirements of their course. Zoe's anxieties concurred with Archer and Hutchings (2001) study as they evidenced the worries that many students have about entering university. This could be that they are anticipating potential problems and that these concerns exemplify their reservations about if they could cope with the transition to HE successfully.

According to Zoe, these contrasts included the context of the institution including the teaching staff and students and the expectations placed on her to complete work independently to timescales. Zoe noted that there were times during her studies when it was more intense in terms of workloads and responsibilities and she recalled being busier during periods when she was on work-based placements. Zoe's experiences correspond with Thacker and Novak's (1991) analysis of the stresses of mature women who have re-entered education, and this demonstrates the problems that women can experience at the same time as studying. Even though these times were more "*stressful*" and she was required to manage competing timescales she recalled enjoying these opportunities and she said that she felt that

she had achieved an overall *“sense of pride”* being a student completing a qualification at university. This may illustrate that for Zoe although there were elements of studying that proved to be challenging and there were other aspects that were beneficial and that she enjoyed. This could be evidenced by her comments suggesting that her confidence had improved and that this new *“sense of pride”* and *“worth”* were motivational factors that encouraged her to continue with her studies irrespective of the challenges that she met.

Similarly, to Ruby, Zoe seemed to find the travelling to and from university challenging and recollected her anxieties; *“I was scared to go travelling on my own and stuff and because you know obviously, you have to go travelling to different places all of the time”*. This may propose that like Ruby, Zoe had developed the ability to plan and commute independently which is a skill she did not have before starting university. Although, Zoe described this step towards independence as *“scary”*, this also evidences the development that she achieved in terms of acquiring skills that she could use in later life when she had completed her studies. It is here that there seems to be evidence of wider skills being developed through attending a HE institution.

Irrespective of Zoe’s anxieties, she appeared to display a high level of resilience to be able to overcome her hesitations and progress in her studies. Edwards (1993) documents the barriers that women encounter through their studies and explores the emotional strain that women experience through examining their lives in and outside the home. It recognises that studying for a qualification at HE is interfaced with the lives of women and influences their relationships with others. Zoe acknowledged her initial reluctances to learning reflected in

her comments about university being a “*whole new world*” and Edwards (1993) exemplifies that cultural expectations can also impact mature women’s experiences. This may propose that Zoe’s outlook indicates that she may have felt that she was entering an unfamiliar place that she was unaccustomed to that made her feel anxious. One explanation for this may have been because she thought that she was doing something that she did not think was expected of her as a lone mother.

Additionally, Zoe said that she enjoyed the variety of opportunities offered at university and benefitted from the combination of practical experiences within the workplace through the placement opportunities alongside studying. This helped her to understand the subject area and gain practical experience. Zoe indicated that she had a positive relationship with her tutors and explained that they provided guidance and support to help students undertake tasks, they were then expected through more independent tasks and study to find information out for themselves. Zoe highlighted that there were provisions in place to support students such as tutorial time and online resources that would remind students of key dates such as submission dates and assessment guidelines. However, the emphasis was on them as independent learners to take ownership of their studies. In terms of personal development, Zoe said that she believed that university life had helped her to grow in confidence through encouraging her to attain independence.

Through our conversations, it was interesting to discover that Zoe seemed to apply the knowledge and skills that she learnt in university into her placement and work setting. This shows that her experiences had helped her to develop an understanding of theory and

aspects that she could apply to practice. Zoe recalled that she could put what she *“learnt into practice”* and enjoyed the *“practical side”* of her learning opportunities. The idea of being able to use the experiences and knowledge gained from her learning opportunities and transfer them to a more hands-on setting seemed to appeal to Zoe. It also appeared to demonstrate that she could see the relevance of her academic studies in a work-based environment.

Zoe’s comments gave the impression that she was taking control of her life in some way as she said that she enjoyed learning and suggested that the alternative to this would be in a *“dead end job”*. This might indicate that she believed that this opportunity had enhanced her prospects and had provided a more enriched experience that she would have gained from her employment. In this respect, education may be the key to Zoe being able to move forward in her career by improving her prospects through gaining qualifications that would inevitably increase her employability in the future. This is reinforced by Graduate Labour Market Statistics that specify that in 2016 *“working age (aged 16-64) graduates earned on average £9,500 more than non-graduates”* (Department for Education, 2017) signifying that their annual earnings are higher than those who have not achieved a university degree. These statistics seem to resonate with Zoe’s hopes for a more prosperous earning potential following the completion of her studies and may be a real incentive for mature women attempting to develop their careers.

Jill referred to her time at university participating in activities in her learning community with enthusiasm as she told me; *“it opened my eyes...got me into reading...made me more aware”*

Jill recognised the links that studying had to her working practices and selected aspects of her learning that were most relevant to her daily work with service users such as social policy. Reflecting on her previous expectations about how intellectually challenging her studies had been, Jill said that she had initially been dismissive about how difficult learning would be on a foundation degree. This is captured when Jill recalled *“I dumbed it down as if it wasn’t hard as I thought”* but stated *“it actually was”*. This suggests that Jill did not know how difficult returning to study would be or that she felt able to openly share how challenging her studies had been to others. These comments may suggest that Jill’s bravado was shielding her real emotions and the fact that she had found this a difficult and challenging time in her life.

Jill discussed how she found studying relevant when she could identify its links to her practice and see how it could enhance her work with service users. She captured the skills that she had gained during her studies including encouraging her to read and develop an awareness of issues such as *“social policy”* that she said had helped her to *“open[ed]”* her *“eyes”*. Being able to learn something new may be one attraction of HE for mature students who are feeling trapped in their current circumstances. Jill commented on how her learning had *“planted seeds”* demonstrating that this opportunity had encouraged her to grow and develop her knowledge through her experiences. This development may be on many levels but for Jill, it seemed that she felt that she had accomplished something that she described as *“hard”*, implying that it was demanding. Jill also talked about how she had initially *“dumbed down”* her qualification and it appeared that she had felt that because she had returned to HE to complete a foundation degree it was in some way inferior to other courses. Jill informed me later in our conversations that she had continued to enrol on a *“top up”* degree course that

would enable her to attain a full undergraduate degree award. It is interesting that Jill regards studying for a foundation degree as a lesser form of study and may suggest that she has a perception of the hierarchal nature of study and degree qualifications.

Self-perception and self-belief seemed to be an ongoing theme throughout the women's stories and Ruby also told me how she felt that she was unlike other students at university and stated;

I think that I stood out like a sore thumb because I was a mature student I did feel quite separate from the younger ones that were in halls. Especially because I travelled as well I didn't have like a student life it did just feel like a day job I mean but yeah...yeah, I kind of like got stuck in and really made an effort...because I could not go back on it...it wasn't like I was going to be...I didn't have a second chance really.

Ruby said that she had noticed dissimilarities between herself and the younger students as she said that she felt that as a mature student she had a different experience than the individuals who were living in the halls. She described this as being “*separate*” from the other students and these comments may suggest that she felt that she did not fit in or was isolated. Ruby stated that because of her circumstances and living arrangements she did not participate in “*student life*” as fully as she would have if she had been residing on campus.

Ruby described her thoughts on fellow students;

...a bit geeky...it was weird...it was weird I mean I have been on other sports courses and you meet different types of people...you can proper bracket people...but even the sporty people...it's like...I don't know whether I fitted in with them either...it might just be me...but yeah a bit geeky but just not my type.

Ruby noted that one of the marked differences about her experiences as a mature student was that she travelled independently to and from university, lived away from the campus and did not interact socially with the other students or fully integrate into student life. These variations may have contributed to how Ruby said that she felt different from the other students in many ways. Ruby said that irrespective of this, she recognised that this was her chance to gain the qualification that she needed to enter her chosen career. This may suggest that even though Ruby described her experiences as a student as *“separate”* at times from the younger students she recognised that this opportunity was a chance to improve her qualifications and felt that she did not have a *“second chance”*. For Ruby, it looked as if there was emphasis placed on her to realise her potential as a non-traditional student (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). She may have believed that stepping out into HE was a *“second chance”* at learning and because of this she grasped the opportunity regardless of the difficulties that she had experienced mixing with other students.

One explanation for Ruby’s apparent discomfort with mixing with other students may be that she perceived herself as different from them and perhaps felt that they regarded her as unlike them as an older student. Ruby seemed to have clear hopes for the future and aspired to achieve her qualification with a very fixed goal in sight. It could have been that the other students sensed that she did not want to engage with them in social events and this may correspond with the feelings that Ruby had of being *“separate”*. Although this illustrates disparities between the groups of students, it also shows how these dissimilar people are drawn together by a forced similarity of wanting to succeed at HE.

The idea of a “*second chance*” at education highlighted in the literature by Giles (1990) is an interesting point of discussion in relation to Ruby’s experiences more generally as she said that she was dissatisfied with some of her prior qualifications and decided that she needed to improve her A’ Level grades before starting her degree course. This interlinks with Scanlon (2008) who argues that many mature students perceive returning to education as a second chance at learning where they can achieve a qualification and gain something that they may not have achieved before at secondary schooling. This is viewed as an opportunity that is often valued as they have had to sacrifice something to return to education. This may include changing careers, giving up their free time and financially contributing to the associated costs of studying.

Ruby’s comments may indicate that she had to relinquish aspects of her life such as free time due to the increased time requirements of travelling to and from university alongside sacrificing the opportunity to experience student life on site as she lived at home with her partner. Through our conversations, Ruby appeared to focus on using her “*second chance*” at education in a very planned way where she said that she “*got stuck in*”. It seemed that she calculated the necessities and remained fixed on her end objective to achieve the qualification that she needed for the next step of her career. Consequently, it appeared that she felt that she had sacrificed aspects of student life to be able to attain these goals by travelling to university rather than living on campus and remaining separate from the social features of student life.

It was particularly thought-provoking when Ruby shared that she felt that studying at university felt *“like a day job”* where she had to make *“an effort”* which may indicate that she felt that this experience was a chore that she had to get on with rather than enjoy. It may appear to suggest that Ruby considered education to be an imposition. Ruby summarised this by stating that being a mature student with other commitments was *“real life”* and furthered this point by stating that the *“hardest motivation”* for her was having to *“get up and do it”*. Ruby seems to pay attention to the difficulties that she faced in terms of adapting to university life, integrating with others and keeping motivated.

Like Ruby’s comments about the challenges of remaining motivated throughout her studies, Reay, Crozier and Clayton, (2010) illustrate that retention of non-traditional groups is one of the challenges of widening participation initiatives and government policy. They examine the experiences of mature students who have completed an access course entering HE. Through looking at the issues confronted by this group including students who failed to complete their studies they summarise that factors including gender, ethnicity and individual circumstances such as being a lone mother are influential on student’s experiences of HE and consequent withdrawal rates. They focus specifically on mature, working-class, lone mothers and propose that for inequalities in education to be addressed, the government’s widening participation initiatives need to reflect through their educational policies and planning in practice the real challenges for these groups to tackle inequalities.

Through our conversations based on the positive aspects of returning to education, it became apparent that Sally felt that she had many positive experiences at university. Sally described

how inspiring her encounters with artists had been on her learning and how this had encouraged her to use the methods that she had learnt in her subsequent work as an artist. Through her contact with “*fantastic artists*” coupled with the fact that returning to education had enabled her to do so meant that she could draw upon her knowledge and experiences and apply them to her current career. I also discovered that Sally had become an artist who frequently used the felt making techniques that she had developed at university. Sally recalled;

You know because the inspirations that you got from the other people on the course some of them are fantastic artists.... If I hadn't of gone back I wouldn't have then leant about felt making and I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now.

Sally recollected the interactions that she had with her tutors and artists that she encountered during her time at university and reflected on the impact that they had on her professional life once she had graduated. Sally said that she thought that she could learn from her tutors and gain techniques in areas such as felt making that she developed at later stages of her career that she progressed into becoming an established felt artist with her own art gallery. Sally stated that she believed that it was these experiences that shaped her knowledge and understanding by showing her new ways of producing art work and using materials.

Sally's recollections may suggest that HE can provide students with the opportunities to develop skills that they might not have been able to gain without a higher level of study or information. Consequently, by developing an advanced knowledge base and enriched skills, students may be able to progress in various ways regardless of if this is on a personal or professional level. However, statistics suggests that although HE may offer opportunities for

individuals, gender is an influential feature of employment and earnings for graduates. For example, the Graduate labour market statistics for 2016 outline these variations overleaf;

Male and female graduates had similar unemployment rates across the working age population, but male graduates had a higher employment rate and a lower inactivity rate than their female counterparts. This greater inactivity rate for female graduates could be linked to a higher likelihood of taking time out of the labour market due to childcare responsibilities (Department for Education, 2017, p. 18).

Further to this point, the median salaries documented for male and female graduates in 2016, specify that “male graduates earned £8,000 more than female graduates, on average within the working age population.” Interestingly it documents that although these differences were present in the younger population, it stated that “the gap in median salaries between young male and female graduates was narrower at £2,500”. The report suggests that this “gap was partially explained by the fact that male graduates had lower inactivity rates and greater high-skilled employment rates, typically associated with higher average salaries, than female graduates” (Department for Education, 2017, p.19). This disparity is explained by females having higher ‘inactivity levels’ that may be explained by them taking time away from work due to caring responsibilities of having children. This illustrates the impact of gender inequalities that continue after the point of graduation and although Sally told me that her children now attend school fulltime, these statistics may portray the real challenges that female graduates encounter in comparison to their male colleagues. Subsequently, it suggests that even at the point when they have completed their studies and entered the workforce, females are susceptible to experiencing additional challenges that can impact their earnings and possibly progression in the workplace.

For Sally, it seemed that this had resulted in a combination of personal and professional enhancements as she recalled at an earlier point in our conversations feeling that her confidence and self-esteem were low. It emerged that through interactions with others including professional artists, Sally appeared to be able to look forward to the future and take the skills that she had learnt to shape the next stages in her career. Therefore, this may show that HE can have a positive impact on students and may encourage them to contemplate options and possibilities that they may have never considered before.

Many mature students like Sally enter HE with the hope of life changing possibilities. Merrill (1999) attempts to understand the experiences of women at university by considering areas such as cultural factors, relationships between the family, early educational experiences, and the impact of social class and gender. Nevertheless, while there has been progression in moving towards a wider reaching and less elite HE system, it is contested by Merrill (1999) in relation to if it has moved towards a more inclusive system. Merrill (1999) summarises this position by arguing that even though women have become empowered through their learning and experienced some professional development, they have not escaped the inequalities in terms of class and gender within society or in their roles in the home.

When I talked to Jill about her experiences with other students and asked her about thoughts on if she felt that she had fitted in at university, she noticed several dissimilarities between herself and other students. For example, Jill highlighted how they were “*younger*” and noted the fact that they did not have any children and it appeared from her remarks that she felt that she was different from them. Because a lot of the students were studying a course where

the focus was on early years, Jill perceived a difference between herself and the other students based on their professional background.

From my conversations with Jill, it seemed that she did not feel that she had fully integrated with the other students and it might be that she did not develop a sense of belonging with the younger women. This could suggest that she believed that the perceived differences had affected her relationships and because of this she did not necessarily identify herself as the same as the younger students. It may be that she did not attach importance in terms of similarities or differences or it may be that she did not feel that these dissimilarities mattered if she attained what she had set out to achieve. For some students, developing a sense of belonging is a vital part of university life and universities dedicate a significant amount of time and resources to encourage students to participate in events such as Freshers Week, clubs and societies and other efforts to engage them in the ethos of university life. Additionally, establishing social support from other students is another important aspect for many students to settle into HE, their academic environment and integrate into the social side of university. Consequently, Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) argue that developing a firm basis of social support is the most influential factor of undergraduate success in their first year of HE.

Jill also told me that she had made herself “*not fit in*” suggesting that she had excluded herself from the group and these feelings of being out of place is recognised by Reay et al. (2010). Jill explained that she “*could relate*” more with the tutors than some of the students on her course and it seemed that the age difference was one reason why Jill felt that she did not fit

in. This suggests that mature students may experience difficulties relating to younger students and that in some instances they find it easier to interact with the tutors that may be based on their age and previous life experiences. The idea of not being able to fit in and perceiving that you are 'the odd one out' is examined by Mannay (2013) and can result in students feeling alienated from educational systems including at school, post 16 learning or further and HE institutions. Jill's comments seem to confirm that her assumptions and views of HE seemed to be supported by her feelings and experiences once at university.

Through our conversations, Zoe said that she fitted into university life and was accepted amongst other students. Although Zoe said that she was aware that there were different groups of friends within her course she felt that everyone "*got on with each other*" It emerged from Lucy's experiences that she perceived differences amongst the students attending HE but also acknowledged that this diversity resulted in "*little groups*" that seemed to get along with each other.

Zoe explained;

There's lots of different groups...it's not like...like little clicks...do you know what I mean there not just one big groups there's lots of little clicks ... there's girly girls...there's all different groups like there's the mature ones there's a like...we had the group of mental health and then the normal nurses... so, it was clicky like that but then in the little groups there was other little clicks, but everyone still got on with each other.

Ruby's relationship with other students was shown when I asked Ruby if she felt that she fitted in and she replied, "*not really no*".

Ruby explained this further below;

I wasn't bothered that didn't really affect me...I wasn't bothered by it...I'm that type of person. I knew that when I went in and I wasn't going to be like going out and clubbing it or being really close to people so that didn't bother me but no definitely not.

It gives the impression from Ruby's comments that she had decided before entering HE that she was not going to participate in areas of student life that she did not feel were suited to her personality. Ruby explained that "clubbing" and "going out" were not activities that she wanted to do and that these decisions did not affect her. This may suggest that for some mature students the chance to return to education and learning is principally an opportunity to focus on achieving a qualification. Here their efforts are primarily on attaining a qualification and is less focused on the more social aspects of studying at university which does not always appeal to them. These decisions may be based on other commitments and restraints that they might be encountering such as time management and financial pressures. Subsequently, mature students may concentrate their efforts into the academic requirements of their course and dismiss the enrichment activities offered on campus.

It was also interesting when Ruby told me that she "knew" that she would not become "really close" with other students on her course that could suggest that she did not see this as an opportunity to make close friends. She also told me that she had accepted this before starting her course. Again, this may highlight how Ruby saw university as a chance to return to learning for a specific purpose and that other experiences including developing friendships, extra activities and similar opportunities were not important to her as she wanted to focus on her goal and not get distracted with other things. It is interesting to note from my conversations

with the women, that what university offers in terms of their hopes and what is received from the students may not confirm their earlier expectations of what HE is like.

Through drawing out the risks and challenges that many mature women students face, illustrates the different priorities that they have compared to middle class students or younger students without caring responsibilities. For example, they may feel positioned outside of the academic world and encounter complexities of trying to fit into a world that is characterised by restrictions. Therefore, Bourdieu (1984, p. 471) proposes that students “exclude themselves” from a place that they are already “excluded” from. For Ruby, it appeared that she knew her place in the university that resonates with Bourdieu (1984) comments that working class know “one’s relationship to the world and one’s proper place within it”. This captures Ruby’s beliefs of assumed expectations and the impact that they have on her perceptions of fitting into a new academic environment.

During our conversations, Sally detailed her experiences and interactions with other students in detail and I have outlined them below. Sally recollects;

...I made a lot of good friends with the 18 year olds...Some of them did have a different attitude to the mature students and they did to the younger ones as well... got more attention and maybe I don't know...and also it worked the other way as well sometimes we...sometimes we had quite a good relationship with some of the tutors in a way we become friends with them.

Sally said that she noted a difference between herself and younger students and identified distinguishing features such as mature students being more “focused”, working at a slower pace than their younger counterparts and that they were less organised. Sally voiced her

opinions about other students and stated that one of the reasons why there was a *“massive difference”* between the two groups was that it was a *“big effort”* for mature students to return to HE because of the *“sacrifices”* that they had made to do this. Sally reported that there were positive influences of being a mature student evidenced with *“higher marks”* as they were more organised than the younger students. Sally furthered this point by explaining that although the younger students may have worked at a faster pace than mature students they were *“a bit more disorganised”*. Sally states several differences that she perceived between herself and the younger students and states; *“Massive...massive differences...we were more focused...it was a big effort for us to go back so we had lots of sacrifices that we were making”*.

So, it seems from Sally’s comments that she believed that younger students did not recognise or appreciate the opportunity that they had been given in relation to entering HE evidenced in her remarks about the *“privileges”* and *“sacrifices”* attached to studying at university. Sally’s remarks about how mature students identify studying at HE as an honour and because of this put an increased amount of effort into their studies compared to their younger counterparts. However, this is in complete contrast to the biases captured by Leathwood and O’Connell (2003). Leathwood and O’Connell (2003, p. 599) exemplify that some believe that by opening HE from an elitist system to a wider cohort such as non-traditional students they are risking a mass system that *“creates chaos and pollutes the pristine and pure university environment.”* Therefore, by progressing from a discriminatory system that is underpinned by class inequalities, it is allowing those without the necessary and *“proper”* educational

background to attend HE. They also note that there is an assumption that these students do not have “appropriate aspirations and attitudes” and hence, are not best placed at university.

In specific reference to Sally’s narrative, this contrasts with her perceptions of how mature students work incredibly hard and were “*more focused*” as they recognised that returning to education “*was a big effort*” with “*lots of sacrifices*”. Sally compared the younger students by noting key distinguishing features such as them attaining lower marks, being less focused and being less organised. This view is concurred by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) who illustrate that mature students are often more motivated and aware of the expectations in terms of work and study that is required of them compared to younger students.

Chapter six: Conclusions

My research focused on five women Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally and their experiences of HE. Their journeys illustrated the many challenges that these mature women have tackled during their time spent studying at university. Although these women may have desired to escape their then roles both in the home and workplace, the transition to HE and consequences of this move have been shown to have had a significant impact upon their lives and the lives of those around them. The research has highlighted that key issues around shifting cultural norms and values, alongside changes in a personal sense of identity have been evoked. The research also showed that a return to HE forced the women to confront many of their initial beliefs about what being a student in HE was like. It revealed how they may not have fully recognised the implications of stepping out into the unfamiliar world of HE by attempting to participate in something that they were not essentially expected to do or thought to be attainable and in this, considers an uncomfortable imagery: the pretence of HE, the illusory claims it may make.

In listening to the experiences of Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally, a contribution to the existing body of knowledge about the challenges faced by non-traditional students in HE is revealed. In drawing on the experiences of women, pertinent details which may identify them as a particular kind of non-traditional student were unearthed. It has contributed by offering key points detailing the challenges such as competing responsibilities and changing selves that opened up opportunities but also challenged their assumed identities. This research was

intended to enable the women to tell their stories wholeheartedly and capture their views about HE in careful detail.

The conversations disclosed that wanting to change their circumstances, hoping to enhance their prospects and achieve their potential were motivational factors for returning to learning. The impact of both negative factors including difficulties with time management and financial issues alongside more positive factors such as engaging with other students and learning new things were addressed individually by each woman. However, there were also general issues that were coherent across the group of women as a common theme. By each of the women in turn, they all agreed that issues such as having a good network of support, motivation and determination had the greatest impact on the way in which they had managed their studies. They have all started to embrace changes in their lives, for example Lucy is hoping to continue her education and begin a master's degree in nursing.

The organisational skills gained like completing assignments and tasks in addition to developing time management skills have transferred to the workplace. Jill told me that she has used her knowledge of theories learnt on her course and applied them in her role supporting children, young people and their families. Zoe found that she could embed the knowledge and skills that she developed at university in her work setting. For Lucy, attending university changed her life considerably and enabled her to advance her career and fulfil a more specialist role. Whereas, Sally said that without this opportunity she would not have been able to accomplish her goal to become an artist.

However, the impact of attending HE was not as life changing for others such as Ruby who noted that it had given her skills to help her children with their schoolwork but said that it had not really changed her personally or professionally. It appeared that for Ruby, the experience of HE has not had the impact they she initially thought it would have and it did not seem to open any further opportunities as she said that it had not changed her life in any way. Ruby also told me that she would not want to complete any further study and on reflection would not have attended university if she had been required to pay for her qualification. It appears that Ruby had an unwillingness to pay for her studies but was happy to take it for free. This possibly raises further questions about Ruby's motivations and if they may have been influenced by a financial incentive of getting student funding. Surprisingly, Ruby said that she would like her children to enter HE in the future and this suggests that she placed some value on HE and possibly still viewed it as a gateway to other things.

There are many barriers to returning around education which have been highlighted, for example, time restrictions, financial costs of studying, constraints such as work and home commitments, the need for further flexible opportunities, accessibility of courses and for universities to support mature students in a holistic way. In the conversations, several benefits of returning to and being in HE were revealed including the improvement in personal confidence and self-esteem. It also had an impact upon career progression and opened avenues for the future, for example Jill told me that she had had a promotion following attaining her degree qualification.

In relation to this, Pascall and Cox's (1993) study in the 1980s concluded that women viewed education as a catalyst for change in effecting a change to their current circumstances and in some way, improving their quality of life. In the light of this, although my research has been conducted over 30 years later, there are echoes with the work of Pascall and Cox (1993, p. 139) but ideas emerged in my own research which are problematic in light of the issues these authors found. Their initial interviews with women highlighted how they "saw education as the starting point of a new process: as a way of breaking out of domesticity, low-paid work and the mesh in which low-paid work, women's careers and domesticity ensnared them". Consequently, it seems to empower them to an extent but also keeps them in a sphere in which they already exist.

Ruby told me that her life was unaffected by attending HE and said that this opportunity had not enhanced her prospects. It seemed that following studying for an undergraduate degree at university, Ruby's position had remained unchanged and that this experience did not appear to have affected her sense of being or had a significant impact on her career. Additionally, Ruby told me that she had not had any professional progression since graduating and said that she did not continue into the career that had motivated her to return to education. This may suggest that for Ruby, her hopes, expectations and thoughts about HE had not fully materialised once she had entered HE and attained her qualification. Ruby is currently caring for her two children at home whilst her husband works fulltime. As a single parent, Zoe discussed the strain that studying and working had on her time at home and she told me that she had needed considerable assistance from her family. It could be said that HE has empowered the women to achieve a university qualification that they never thought they

would have attained in earlier years of their lives. Though, irrespective of their new qualifications they are still experiencing the challenges of being a mother, wife or partner, student and employee and the expectations and responsibilities that this brings.

My research moves beyond the starting point of education raised by Pascall and Cox as it provides a more current view of mature women's experiences of education and exemplifies the challenges encountered by women attempting to embrace a neo-liberal (Lakes & Carter, 2011) ideology. This vision proposes that individuals can change their circumstances through taking ownership of their learning and improving their economic situation. However, in reality these women did not find their experiences easy and according to Jackson & Bisset, (2005, p. 196) may be at risk of having "chase credentials". Therefore, it could be said that the women in my research strived to obtain qualifications that they felt that they needed rather than wanted and viewed HE as an opportunity to gain something as a commodity rather than attaining a qualification as a personal achievement.

Marxist Feminist such as Benston (1969) and Vogel (2013) propose that to address gender inequalities, capitalism must be tackled. They argue that this must be by challenging patriarchy and acknowledging the role that women perform through their responsibilities. This includes domestic and caring duties and proposes that there is a need for the recognition of the value of their work on the economy. This would require restructuring the capitalist system in society and free women from a perceived and felt, domestic oppression. Many of the women in my research shared the difficulties of studying whilst caring for their children

and managing the home. Lucy also implied that when she was caring for her children at home fulltime she felt a lesser person than when she had completed her nursing qualification and entered the labour market. This may illustrate Gilman's (1898) argument that women's oppression comes from the home in the 'private sphere' and that in order for women to be liberated from their work there needs to be an appreciation that is acknowledged in the 'public sphere'.

It emerged that the women in my study viewed their attainments as a way to move out of the home and gain recognition by others and in the workplace. Through our conversations, the women's comments including Jill and Lucy's explanations about returning to HE suggests that they had felt inferior to other people before achieving their degree and entering the workforce as a qualified professional. It seemed that their previous roles and experiences in the home or as a caregiver were deemed to be less valuable than when they had secured employment. Lucy told me that it had changed her outlook, improved her circumstances and made her a "*better person*" and said that her experiences had given her the drive to progress in her career and future study.

However, Sally shared her emotional difficulties and feelings of "*guilt*" that she had experienced in attempting to develop her talents and become an artist. Therefore, the costs of returning to HE varied across the women's accounts and revealed their expectations and disappointments about how they imagined HE would be. It could be said that the women decided to return to HE for reasons such as wanting to develop their career, but this was alongside more personal goals of reinventing themselves in some way. Jill, Lucy, Zoe, Sally

and Ruby all discussed feelings of being dissatisfied with their circumstances before starting university. It may be that they believed HE offered a solution to issues that they were experiencing such as “*being stuck*” in their employment as remarked by Zoe or discontented with their roles either in the home or workplace. Additionally, Pascall and Cox’s study seemed to highlight that education was the means for women to change their situations, gain greater independence and through this opportunity develop in some way. In my research, the women’s experiences appeared to concur with these findings to some degree as they also expressed that they have become more confident and had increased opportunities and job prospects because of studying at university.

As I got to know the women more and became more familiar with what mattered to them, Spradley’s (1979, p. 92) ideas about ethnographic interpretation became more important “ethnographic analysis is the search for the parts of a culture and their relationships as conceptualized by informants” and that “most of the time this internal structure as it is known to the informants remains tacit [and] outside their awareness”. In this research, through my personal conversations, I feel I developed a trusting relationship and demonstrated integrity by being open and honest when conducting the interviews where I could explore what mattered to Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally.

On reflection, my research appears to validate that many of the matters raised in the literature reviewed and I expected to find issues such as financial pressures and difficulties managing other commitments such as caring responsibilities. However, I did not predict the impact of ambition, self-determination and wanting to achieve goals were such motivational

factors for mature students. This was shown through the interviews with the women as Lucy's told me repeatedly about her desire to become a nurse and Sally said that she was focused about reaching her goal to become an artist. This focus seemed to illustrate how although women are faced with a complex and diverse range of issues when returning to HE they are also very driven in wanting to achieve their targets.

This research adopts a certain stance when examining topics; for example, women's experiences of returning to HE have been addressed through the perspective of mature working-class women from a specific area in the Northwest of England. Moreover, I am writing from the perspective of a mature woman who has returned to education which may have had an influence on the way the research unfolded. In addition, I had a previous connection with the women in that we all were mature students who had studied at HE whilst managing caring responsibilities which although enhancing the ease with which we were able to talk, may have influenced the research as I may be more appreciative of the challenges they have met. In contrast to this, my influence may be more critical causing a negative impact on the data because I may have brought preconceptions about perceived difficulties due to my own experiences as a mature student.

The interviews were completed with the women within a relatively short time frame but on reflection, it may have been useful to allow longer periods of time between each interview to ponder about their responses, although during transcribing the interviews it provided a further opportunity to think about what each woman said. My research could be beneficial in that it encouraged Lucy, Jill, Zoe, Ruby and Sally to reflect on their experiences and

appreciate the problems that they have successfully overcome. A few of the women expressed that they did not realise how much their learning had helped them progress in terms of their academic achievements and personal development. Furthermore, most of the women said that it had made them think about their time at university and how factors had influenced their experiences.

This research opportunity has informed my practice and has been a valuable learning experience and I feel this has enhanced my professional development and highlighted how important it is to consider feedback from others. Through sharing conversations with the women and listening attentively, I have learned about some of the challenges that mature women experience when trying to improve their prospects. On reflection, I feel that certain aspects of their narratives resonate with my experiences of HE but acknowledge that everyone's journey through HE is unique to them and their individual situations. I hope that my findings have highlighted some of the positive aspects of returning to education alongside enhancing our knowledge and perhaps drawing attention to the complex challenges which non-traditional students can encounter.

My final thoughts, on reflection are that I have been involved in some form of learning and training over the last eighteen years which has consisted of participating in a range of experiences including completing an undergraduate degree, two master's degrees, continuing professional development opportunities and gaining a post-graduate diploma in Social Work. I successively used my knowledge and experiences gained of HE in this study as I have worked in a variety of educational settings throughout my employment history. This

included being a member of a Social Inclusion Team in a secondary school. During this time, I could participate in HE and contribute to the learning of others by supporting fellow colleagues with their studies.

Furthermore, I witnessed first-hand some of the difficulties and benefits that this brought. This included individuals holding fixed assumptions about the challenges of completing courses of study and feeling anxious because of this. However, I also noted more positive aspects such as their progression in the workplace and how it had increased their confidence in specific areas of their roles. In all of this, I feel that my life has also been enriched with the different learning opportunities and experiences encountered throughout my time completing a doctorate. I have overcome several challenges including changing employment, careers and studying whilst caring for my family. Although, my journey to the completion of my thesis may not have been what I had anticipated, I feel that it has been a worthwhile experience that has enhanced my life personally and professionally.

References

- Abercrombie, N (2004). *Sociology: A Short Introduction* (Polity Short Introductions). Cambridge: Polity Press Ltd.
- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & society*, 20(4), 441-464.
- Acker, J., Barry, K. and Esseveld, J. (1991). Objectivity and truth: problems in doing feminist research. In M. Fonow and J. Cook. (eds), *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Acker, S. (1994). *Gendered education - sociological reflections on women, teaching and feminism*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431-447.
- Ahier, J. & Moore, R. (1999). Post-16 education, semi-dependent youth and the privatisation of inter-age transfers: re-theorising youth transition, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20, 515-530.
- Alasuutari, P., Bickman, L., & Brannen, J. (Eds.). (2008). *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*. Sage.
- Allatt, P. (1996). Conceptualizing parenting from the standpoint of children: relationship and transition in the life course. *Children in families: Research and policy*, 130-144.
- Allen, K. R., & Baber, K. M. (1992). Ethical and epistemological tensions in applying a postmodern perspective to feminist research. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 16(1), 1-15.
- Alsop, R., Gonzalez-Arnal, S., & Kilkey, M. (2008). The widening participation agenda: the marginal place of care. *Gender and Education*, 20(6), 623-637. doi:10.1080/09540250802215235.
- Alvesson, M., & Sköldberg, K. (2009). *Reflexive methodology: New vistas for qualitative research*. Sage.
- Anderson, C (1960). Ministry of Education and the *Secretary of State for Scotland Grants to Students: Report of the Committee Cmnd 1051* London: HMSO.
- Aune, Kristin, and Jonathan Dean. 2015. "Feminism Resurgent? Mapping ContemporaryFeminist Activisms in Europe." In *Social Movement Studies*:1 –21.

- Anthias, F. (2001). The material and the symbolic in theorizing social stratification: issues of gender, ethnicity and class. *The British journal of sociology*, 52(3), 367-390.
- Anthias, F., & Yuval-Davis, N. (1992). Racialized Boundaries: Race. *Nation*, 303.
- Archer, Land Hutchings, M (2001). 'Bettering yourself'? Discourses of risk. Costs and benefit in ethnically diverse, young working lass non-participants' constructions of higher education *British Journal of Sociology and Education* 22: 4p555-575
- Arnott, M, David, M E and Weiner, G. (1999). *Closing the Gender Gap: Post War Education and Social Change* Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Atkinson, W., Roberts, S., & Savage, M. (2013). Introduction: A critical sociology of the age of austerity. In *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain* (pp. 1-12). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Avis, J. M., & Turner, J. (1996) Feminist lenses in family therapy research: Gender, politics, and science. *Research methods in family therapy*, 145-169.
- Ball, S. and Gewirt, S. (1997). 'Girls in the education market: choice, competition and complexity', *Gender and Education*, 9(2):207-22.
- Bamber, J. and Tett, L. (1999). 'Opening the doors of higher education to working class adults: A case study', *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol 18 (6), pp.465-475.
- Bamber, J., Galloway, V. and Tett, L. (2006). 'Widening participation and meta-learning: Risking less in higher education', *Journal of Continuing Education*, vol 12(1), pp.20-33.
- Barnett, C. (2001) *Prelude to an industrial defeat from the 1944 Education Act to the 1956 White Paper on Technological Education*. London: Royal Society of Arts.
- Barrett, M. (1988). *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter (Revised) (Cognition)*. Great Britain: Verso.
- Barrett, M. (2014). *Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*. Verso Books.
- BBC (2017) 'BBC's 9% gender pay gap revealed', 4 October 2017.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-41497265#>
- Beaumont, C. (2017) *What Do Women Want? Housewives' Associations, Activism and Changing Representations Of Women In The 1950s*, *Women's History Review*, 26:1, 147-162, Doi: 10.1080/09612025.2015.1123029.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity* (Vol. 17). Sage.
- Becker, G. S. (1993). Nobel lecture: The economic way of looking at behavior. *Journal of political economy*, 385-409.

- Bell, D., Caplan, P., & Karim, W. J. (Eds.). (2013). *Gendered fields: Women, men and ethnography*. Routledge.
- Bell, J. (2006). *Doing your research project* (4th Edition) [electronic book] Buckingham: OU Press.
- Bell, J. (2014). *Doing Your Research Project: A guide for first-time researchers*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Bennett, T., Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Gayo-Cal, M., Wright, D. (2009). *Culture, Class, Distinction*. Abington: Routledge.
- Benston, Margaret. "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation. "Monthly Review, 1969.
- BERA (2011). *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*. British Educational Research Association: London.
- Berkove, G. F. (1979). Perceptions of husband support by returning women students. *Family Coordinator*, 451-457.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, Codes and Control Vol 3*. London: Routledge.
- Blackburn, R and Jarman, J (1993). *Changing Inequalities in Access to British Universities Oxford Review of Education* 19:2, p197-215.
- Blackstone, T. (1987). Education and careers for women and girls: the broken chain, *Policy Studies*, 8, 1-17.
- Boudon, R. (1974). *Education, Opportunity, and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.
- Bourdieu, P and Passeron, J C (1979). *The Inheritors: French Students and their Relation to Culture Chicago*: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood.
- Bourdieu, P. (1989). Social space and symbolic power. *Sociological theory*, 7(1), 14-25.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago press.

- Bowl, M. (2001). Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education. *Research papers in education*, 16(2), 141-160.
- Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1976:1977). *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. sage.
- Bradley, H. (2016). *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality*. United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons.
- Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2013). Ain't I A Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 75-86.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, Clarke, V. (2006). "Using thematic analysis in psychology". *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 3 (2) :27.
- Brewer, J. (2000). *Ethnography*. UK: McGraw-Hill Education.
- Brine, J. (1999). *Under-Educating Women: Globalising Inequality*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Brine, J., & Waller, R. (2004). Working-class women on an access course: Risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities. *Gender and Education*, 16(1), 97 - 113.
doi:10.1080/0954025032000170363
- Brines, J. (1994) 'Economic Dependency, Gender and the Division of Labor at Home' *American Journal of Sociology* 100(3): 652-688.
- Brinkmann, S. (2014). *Interview* (pp. 1008-1010). Springer New York.
- Britton, C. and Baxter, A. (2001). Risk, Identity and change: Becoming a mature student', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, vol 8(2), pp.179-194.
- Brown, J. K., O'Laughlin, B., Remy, D., Williams, J., & Young, S. (1974). Engels revisited: Women, the organization of production, and private property. *Woman, culture, and society*, 133, 207.
- Brownmillar, S. (1976). *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. Penguin Books.
- Bryman, A. (2008) (3rd Ed). *Social Research Methods*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Burgess, R. G. (ed) (1984). *The Research Process in Educational Settings*. Lewes, UK: Falmer.

- Burke, P. J. (2002). *Accessing education: effectively widening participation*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Burke, P. J. (2013). *The right to higher education: Beyond widening participation*. Routledge.
- Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*, Abington: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2011). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Callender, C. & Jackson, J. (2004). *Fear of debt and higher education participation*. London: Families and Social Capital ESRC Group.
- Campbell, R., Kyriakides, L., Muijs, D., & Robinson, W. (2004). Effective teaching and values: Some implications for research and teacher appraisal. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(4), 451-465.
- Chodowrow, N. J. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering*. London, United Kingdom: University of California Press.
- Chowdry, H., Crawford, C., Dearden, L., Goodman, A., & Vignoles, A. (2013). Widening participation in higher education: analysis using linked administrative data. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 176(2), 431-457.
- Clarke, C. (2003). *The future of Higher Education*, The Stationary Office: London.
- Clough, P. & Nutbrown, C. (2002). *A student's guide to methodology: Justifying enquiry*. London: Sage.
- Clough, P. (1995). Problems of identity and method in the investigation of special educational needs. *Making difficulties: research and the construction of special needs*, 126-142.
- Clough, P., & Nutbrown, C. (2012). *A student's guide to methodology*. Sage.
- Cmnd, 114 (1987). 'Higher education: Meeting the challenge' (Cm.114)1987.
- Cochrane, K (2013). *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave Feminist*. London:Simon & Schuster, Kindle e-book.

- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research Methods in Education*. London & New York: Routledge. (6th Edition).
- Coleman, J. (1988). 'Social Capital in the creation of human capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, 94:945-15556.
- Collins dictionary (2017). https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/woman_1
- Coppock, V., Haydon, D., & Richter, I. (2014). *The illusions of post-feminism: New women, old myths*. Routledge.
- Coward, R. (1983). *Patriarchal precedents: Sexuality and social relations* (Vol. 983). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Cox, E.M., & Ebbers, L.H. (2010). Exploring the persistence of adult women at a midwest community college. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 34(4), 337-359. doi: 10.1080/10668920802545088
- Craft, M., Cohen, L., & Raynor, J. M. (1972). *Linking Home and School*. Edited by Maurice Craft, John Raynor, Louis Cohen. Longman.
- Cranny-Francis, A., Waring, W., Stavropoulos, P. and Kirkby, J. (2003). *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *U. Chi. Legal Forum.*, 139-167.
- Crenshaw, K.W. (1991). Mapping the margins: intersectionality, Identity politics, and violence against women of colour. *Stanford Law Review*. 43(6): 1241–99.
- Creswell, J. W. (1994). Research design: Quantitative and qualitative approaches. *Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication*.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.
- Crossan, F. (2003). Research philosophy: towards an understanding. *Nurse researcher*, 11(1), 46-55.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. London: Sage.
- Crow, L. D., and Crow, A. (1963) (eds.). *Readings in Human Learning*. New York: McKay.
- Daddow, O. (2013). Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair and the Eurosceptic Tradition in Britain. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 15(2), 210-227.

- David, M. E. (2015). Gender & Education Association: a case study in feminist education? *Gender and Education*, 27(7), 928-946.
- David, M., Bathmaker, A. M., Crozier, G., Davis, P., Ertl, H., Fuller, A., ... & Reay, D. (Eds.). (2009). *Improving learning by widening participation in higher education*. Routledge.
- Davidoff, L., & Hall, C. (2013). *Family fortunes: Men and women of the English middle class 1780–1850*. Routledge.
- Davies, C. (1996). The Sociology of Professions and the Profession of Gender *Sociology* November 1996 vol. 30 no. 4 661-678.
- Davis, K. (2008). Intersectionality as buzzword A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist theory*, 9(1), 67-85.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1972). *La vieillesse*. Putnam.
- De Beauvoir, S. (2014). *The Second Sex*. Random House.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1973). *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books
- de la Harpe, B. and Radloff, A. (2000). Informed teachers and learners: the importance of assessing the characteristics needed for lifelong learning. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(2): 169–182.
- Dean, J., & Whyte, W. (1958). How do you know if the informant is telling the truth? *Human Organization*, 17(2), 34-38.
- Delphy, C., & Leonard, D. (1992). *Familiar exploitation: A new analysis of marriage in contemporary western societies*. Polity Press.
- Denscombe, M. (1998). *The Good Research Guide* Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1970). *The Research Act in Sociology: A Theoretical Introduction in Sociological Methods 3rd edn*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, S. (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage,
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. (2014). *National strategy for access and student success in higher education*. London: Published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills April 2014
- Department for Education (2017). *Graduate labour market statistics 2016*. Department for Education.

- Department for Education and Employment (1996). *Labour market and skill trend*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2007). *Gender and Education: the evidence on pupils in England*. Department for Education and Skills on behalf of HM Government.
- Department for Education. (1994). *Science and maths: a consultation paper on the supply and demand of newly qualified young people*. London: Department for Education.
- Dickens, L. (2006). Re-regulation for gender equality: from 'either/or' to 'both'. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37(4), 299-309.
- Douglas, J. D. (1976). *Investigative social research: Individual and team field research*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Durkheim, E. (1982; [1895]). *The Rules of Sociological Method*. London: Durkheim.
- Durkheim, E. (1984; [1893]). *The Division of Labour in Society*. London: Macmillan.
- Dyhouse, C. (1981). *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* London.
- Ecclestone, K., Biesta, G., & Hughes, M. (2010). Transitions in the lifecourse. *Transitions and learning through the lifecourse*, 1-15.
- Echols, A. (1989). *Daring to be bad: Radical feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Vol. 3). U of Minnesota Press.
- Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature women students: Separating or connecting family and education*. Taylor & Francis.
- Edwards, R. (1997). *Changing places? flexibility, lifelong learning, and a learning society*. psychology press.
- Edwards, R., Armstrong, P., & Miller, N. (2001). Include me out: critical readings of social exclusion, social inclusion and lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 20(5), 417-428.
- Egerton, M. and Halsey, A., H. (1993). Trends by Social Class and Gender in access to Higher Education in Britain *Oxford Review of Education* 19: 2, p183-196.
- Eisenstein, H. (1984). *Contemporary feminist thought*. London: Unwin.
- Equality Act 2010.
- Evans, E. (2015). *The Politics of Third Wave Feminism: Neoliberalism, Intersectionality, and the State in Britain and the US*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Evans, J. (1995). *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second-Wave Feminism*. London: Sage.
- Evans, L, Abbott, I., D. (1998). *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. London: Cassell, 1-167.
- Ezzy, D. (2002). *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation*. Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin.
- Faludi, S. (1991). *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*. London: Vintage
- Fendler, L. (2006). Why generalisability is not generalisable. *Journal of philosophy of education*, 40(4), 437-449.
- Field, C. (2011). "Made Women of When They Are Mere Children": Mary Wollstonecraft's Critique Of Eighteenth-Century Girlhood. *The Journal Of The History Of Childhood And Youth* 4(2), 197-222. The John Hopkins University Press. Retrieved July 31, 2017, From Project Muse Database.
- Fielding, H. (2001). 'Only-blood-would-be-more-red'. Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty, and The Ethics of Sexuality Difference. *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 32(2), 147-159. 10/1080/00071773.2001.11007326.
- Fielding, N. (1982). Observational research on the national front. In *Social research ethics* (pp. 80-104). Macmillan Education UK.
- Firestone, S. (1971). On American feminism. *Woman in sexist society*, 665-86.
- Fish, J. (2008). Navigating queer street: Researching the intersections of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) identities in health research. *Sociological research online*, 13(1), 12.
- Foucault, M. (1980). The history of sexuality. Volume one: An introduction.
- Foucault, M., Morris, M., & Patton, P. (1979). Michel Foucault Power, Truth, Strategy.
- Fragaso, A., Gonsalves, T., Ribeiro, M, S., Monteiro, R. and Quintas H. (2013). The transition of mature students to higher education: challenging traditional concepts? *Studies in the Education of Adults*. 45 (1): 67-81.
- Fraser, N. (1995). From redistribution to recognition: Dilemmas of justice in a 'post-socialist' age. *New Left Review*, 212:68-93.
- Further and Higher Education Act 1992
- Fuss, D. (2013). *Essentially speaking: Feminism, nature and difference*. Routledge.

- Garry, A. (2011) 'Intersectionality, Metaphors and The Multiplicity of Gender' , *Hypatia*, 26,4: 826-50.
- Gardiner, J. (1997). *Gender, Care and Economics: Interrogating the Masculinity of Rational Economic Man*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Gardner, P. L. (1995). Measuring attitudes to science. *Research in Science Education*, 25,283–289.
- Giddens, A. (1997), *Sociology*. Edn. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens, A. (2009). *Sociology*. (6th ed.). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (2013). *The third way and its critics*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Gilbert, N. (1993). *Researching Social Life*. London: Sage Publications.
- Giles, J. (1990). Second chance, second self? *Gender and Education*, 2(3), 357-361.
doi:10.1080/0954025900020310
- Gillard D (2006) *The Hadow Reports: an introduction*
www.educationengland.org.uk/articles/24hadow.html
- Gillard, D (2007) 'The Norwood Report' (1943)
<http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/Norwood>
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press.
- Gillon, E. (1999). Accessing Access *AUT Bulletin* January.
- Gilman, C. P. (1898). *Women and economics: A Study of the Economic Relation between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Condition*. Small, Maynard & Company.
- Golde, P. (Ed.). (1970). *Women in the field: Anthropological experiences*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Gomm, R. (2008). *Social research methodology: A critical introduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Goode, W. J., & Hatt, P. K. (1952). *Methods in social research*.
- Goodwin, W. L., & Goodwin, L. D. (1996). *Understanding quantitative and qualitative research in early childhood education* (Vol. 59). Teachers College Press.
- Gore, J. (2003) What we can do for you! What can “we” do for “you”? Struggling over empowerment in critical and feminist pedagogy. *The critical pedagogy reader*, 331-348.

- Gouthro, P. (2006). A critical feminist analysis of the homeplace as learning site: expanding the discourse of lifelong learning to consider adult women learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24(1), 5-19. doi: 10.1080/026037042000317310
- Gray, J. (1998). *'Narrative Inquiry'*. Unpublished paper, Edith Cowen University, Western Australia.
- Gregory, J. (1987). *Sex, race and the law: Legislating for equality*. London: Sage.
- Grosz, E. (1995). *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. New York: Routledge.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp.105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guest, G. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Gutierrez, C. O. N., & Hopkins, P. (2015). *Introduction: young people, gender and intersectionality*.
- Habermas, J. (1972). *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapio. London: Heinemann.
- Hadow (1923). *Differentiation of the Curriculum for Boys and Girls* Report of the Consultative Committee London: HMSO.
- Haggard, E.A. "Learning A Process of Change". *Readings in Human Learning*. Edited by Ld. And A Crow. New York. McKay, 1963, pp.19-27.
- Halsey, H Halsey, A. H., Heath, A. F., & Ridge, J. M. (1980). *Origins and destinations*. Oxford.
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* Routledge: London.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principle in Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Hammersley, M. and Gomm, R. (1997). 'Bias in Social Research' *Sociological Research Online*, vol. 2, no. 1, < <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/1/2.html>
- Hanisch, C. (2006;1969). The personal is political. *Radical feminism: A documentary reader*, 113-16.
- Haraway, D. (1997). *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium Femaleman@_-Meets_OncoMouseTM*. New York: Routledge.

- Hartmann, H. (1981). 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: towards a more progressive union', in L. Sargent (ed.), *Women and Revolution: The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*. London: Pluto Press, pp.1-42.
- Hartmann, H. (1982). *Capitalism, patriarchy, and job segregation by sex* (pp. 446-469). Macmillan Education UK.
- Hartstock, N. (1997). 'The feminist standpoint: developing the ground for a specially feminist historical materialism,' in D. Meyers (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp.462-83.
- Hayton, A., & Paczuska, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Access, participation and higher education: Policy and practice*. Routledge.
- Hekman, S. (2013). *Gender and knowledge: Elements of a postmodern feminism*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hendry, C., & Farley, A. H. (2006). Essential skills for students who are returning to study. *Nursing standard*, 21(6), 44-48.
- HERO, (2006).
- Hesketh, A. J. (1999). Towards an economic sociology of the student financial experience of higher education, *Journal of Education Policy*, 14, 385-410.
- Heywood, L. (2006). *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*, vol. 2, Primary Documents. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/glossary/#letterH>
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/aimhigh/>
- Hinton-Smith, T. (2009). Lone parents as HE students: a qualitative email study. In B. Merrill (Ed.), *Learning to Change? The role of identity and learning careers in adult education* (pp. 113-128). Oxford, UK: Peter Lang.
- Hinton-Smith, T. (2015). Negotiating the risk of debt-financed higher education: The experience of lone parent students. *British Educational Research Journal*.
- Hitchcock, G. and Hughes, D. (1995). *Research and the Teacher* (second edition). London: Routledge.
- Homan, R. (1991). *The Ethics of Social Research*. Harlow: Longman.
- Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman Black Women and Feminism*.

- hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- hooks, b. (2000). *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*. London: Pluto Press, 2nd edition.
- Hughes, C. (2002). *Women's Contemporary Lives: Within and Beyond the Mirror*. London: Routledge.
- Hughes, C. (2005). *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Hutchings, M. & Archer, L. (2001). 'Higher than Einstein': constructions of going to university among working-class non-participants, *Research Papers in Education*, 16, 69-91.
- Irigaray, L. (1996). *I Love To You: Sketch Of A Possible Felicity Within History*. Routledge.
- Irigaray, L. (1997). Women on the Market. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, 174-89.
- Jackson, C., & Bisset, M. (2005). Gender and school choice: factors influencing parents when choosing single-sex or co-educational independent schools for their children. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2), 195-211.
- Jagger, A. M. (1989). Love and Knowledge. *Inquiry*, 32: 51-176.
- Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Zeisel, H. (1972). Marienthal. *The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Johnson, D., & Ransom, E. (1983). *Family and School*. Taylor & Francis.
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational researcher*, 33(7), 14-26.
- Jones, R. (2008). *Student Retention and Success: A Synthesis of Research*, York: Higher Education Academy.
- Kallenbach, M. (2003). 'We'll scrap 50pc student target, Tories promise Education', *The Daily Telegraph*, 26 June 2003, p.14
- Kamm, J. (1965). *Hope Deferred: Girls' Education in English History*. London: Methuen.
- Kaye, L. K., & Bates, E. A. (2017). The impact of higher fees on psychology students' reasons for attending university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 41(3), 379-392.

- Kelly, L., Burton, S., & Regan, L. (1994). *Researching women's lives or studying women's oppression? Reflections on what constitutes feminist research* (pp. 27-48).
- Kennedy, H. (1997). Learning Works: widening participation in further education.
- Kettley, N. The Past, Present and Future of Widening Participation Research *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (May, 2007), pp. 333-347.
- Knowles, S., M., Holon III E., F. & Swanson, R., A. (2005) (6th ed.). *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. London, UK: Elsevier Inc.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1970). Logic of discovery or psychology of research. *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, 1-23.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London.: Sage.
- Lakes, R. D., & Carter, P. A. (2011). Neoliberalism and education: An introduction. *Educational Studies*, 47(2), 107-110.
- Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). 'It's a struggle': the construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *J. Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615.
- Lee, R. M. (1993) *Doing research on sensitive topics*. Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Liam Puttong, P & Essy, D. (2005). *Qualitative Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Lichtman, M. (2012). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide: A User's Guide*. Sage.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lorber, J. (1994). *Paradoxes of gender*. Yale University Press.
- Lucey, H., Melody, J and Walkerdine, V. (2003). 'Uneasy hybrids: Psychological aspects of becoming educationally successful for working-class young women', *Gender and Education*, vol 15(3) pp.285-299.
- Luxton, M., & Armstrong, P. (1991). Margaret Lowe Benston, 1937–1991. *Studies in Political Economy*, 35(1), 7-11.
- MacLeod, D. and Major, L.E. (2002) 'Higher Education: Closures on the cards: Margaret Hodge warns of vanishing universities', *The Guardian*, 16 April 2002, p. 9.

- Mannay, D., & Morgan, M. (2013). Anatomies of inequality: Considering the emotional cost of aiming higher for marginalised, mature mothers re-entering education. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 19(1), 57-75.
- Marcus, George E. and Michael Fischer (1986). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mark-Lawson, J., & Witz, A. (1988). From 'family labour' to 'family wage'? The case of women's labour in nineteenth-century coalmining*. *Social History*, 13(2), 151-174.
- Marsh, I. Campbell, R. and Keating, M. (1998). *Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology*. United Kingdom: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Martin, A. (2003). Introduction: Luce Irigaray and the culture of difference. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 20(3), 1-12.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2001[1848]). *The Communist Manifesto*. London: Electric Book Co.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1859). (1970). *A contribution to the critique of political economy*, 1.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1965). *The German Ideology*. London.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1967). The communist manifesto (1848). *Trans. AJP Taylor*. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1972). *The German Ideology* (Vol. 1). International Publishers Co.
- Mascia-Lees, F. E., Sharpe, P., & Cohen, C. B. (1989). The postmodernist turn in anthropology: Cautions from a feminist perspective. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 15(1), 7-33.
- Maslow, A., H. (1970). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Maushart, S. (2001). *Wifework: What Marriage Really Means for Women*, London: Bloomsbury.
- May, T. (1997). *Social Research: Issues, methods and process*. Buckingham, Open University Press.
- May, T. (2001) (3rd Ed.). *Social Research: Issues, methods and process*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Mayo, C. (2007). Intersectionality and queer youth. *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, 4(2), 67-71.
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771-1800.

- Merrill, B. (1999). *Gender, Change and Identity: Mature Women Students in Universities*. Ashgate Publishing Company, Old Post Road, Brookfield, VT 05036.
- Merrill, B. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1859-1871
- Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev.edn. Glencoe: Free Press.
- Merton, R. K. and Kendall, P. L. (1986). *The focused interview*. American Journal of Sociology. 51, 541-557.
- Milburn, A. (2012). *University Challenge: How Higher Education Can Advance Social Mobility – A Progress Report by the Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility and Child Poverty*, London: Crown.
- Miller, T., Birch, M., Mauthner, M., & Jessop, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Ethics in qualitative research*. Sage.
- Millett, K. (1977). *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago.
- Mittler, P. (2000). *Working Towards Inclusive Education Social Contexts*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Morgan, D. (1981). Men, masculinity and the process of sociological enquiry. *Doing feminist research*, 83-113.
- Murchison, J. (2010). *Ethnography essentials: Designing, conducting, and presenting your research* (Vol. 25). John Wiley & Sons.
- Naidoo, R. (2003). Repositioning higher education as a global commodity: Opportunities and challenges for future sociology of education work. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 24(2), 249-259.
- Narayan, U. (1998). 'The project of feminist epistemology: perspectives from a non-western feminist', in M Rodgers (ed.), *Contemporary Feminist Theory: A Text/Reader*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, pp. 82-9.
- Neuman, W. L. (2000) (4th Edition). *Social Research Methods, Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Allyn & Bacon. Boston.
- Norwood, C. (1943). *Curriculum and Examinations in Secondary Schools: Report of the Committee of the Secondary School Examinations Council Appointed by the President of the Board of Education in 1941*. HM Stationery Office.
- Oakley, A. (1972). *Sex, Gender and Society*. Melbourne: Sun Books.

- Oakley, A. (1985) [1974]. *The sociology of housework*. Oxford New York, New York: Basil Blackwell.
- OECD (1998). *Economics and Finance of Lifelong Learning* Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Opie, C. (2004). *Doing educational research: a guide for first-time researchers*. London: Sage.
- O'Shea, S. (2015). "I generally say I am a mum first . . . but I'm studying at uni": The narratives of first-infamily, female caregivers transitioning into an Australian university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 8 (4), 243-257.
- Pascall, G. and Cox, R. (1993). *Women Returning to Higher Education*. Great Britain: Open University Press.
- Penny, L. (2013). *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Peters, H (2000). "Realising what I truly am. Mature women into higher education", *Equal Opportunities International*, Vol. 19 Iss: 2/3/4, pp.39 – 45.
- Plummer, K. (1983). 'Documents of Life-An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method.' *Sociological Review*, 31 (4). pp. 785-787. ISSN
- Powney, J., & Watts, M. (1987). *Interviewing in educational research*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Purvis, J. (1995). Women in education: a historical account 1800–1914. In *Equality and inequality in education policy* (pp. 3-17). Multilingual Matters Ltd. Clevedon.
- Quinn Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*.
- Office for National Statistics. (2013). *Patterns of Pay: Results from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 1997 to 2012* David Bovill, Office for National Statistics.
- Reay, D, David, M and Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of Choice: social class, race and gender in higher education*. London: Institute of Education Press.
- Reay, D. (1998). 'Always knowing 'and 'never being sure': familial and institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Journal of Education Policy*, 13(4), 519-529.
- Reay, D. (2004). 'Mostly roughs and toughs: Social class, race and representation in inner city schooling', *Sociology*, vol 38(5), pp.1005-1023.
- Reay, D. (2006). The zombie stalking English schools: Social class and educational inequality. *British journal of educational studies*, 54(3), 288-307.

- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5-19.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010). "'Fitting in" or "standing out": Working-class students in UK higher education', *British Educational Research Journal*, vol 32(1), pp.1-19.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121.
- Research Governance Handbook and the British Sociological Associations Statement of Ethical Practice (2004).
- Riddell, S., Baron, S. and Wilson, A. (1999). 'Social capital and people with learning difficulties', *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 31 (1): 49-65.
- Ritchie, J. and Lewis. J. (eds.) (2003). *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*. Sage Publications, London.
- Robbins, L. (1963). *Higher Education: Report of a Committee* Cmnd 2154 London: HMSO.
- Roberts, H. (1991) *Doing Feminist Research*, Routledge, 2nd Edition.
- Rose, N. (1998). *Inventing ourselves: Psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rubin, J. Z., Provenzano, F. J., & Luria, Z. (1974). The eye of the beholder: Parents' views on sex of newborns. *American journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 44(4), 512.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding of manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Sawicki, J. (1991). *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, power, and the body*. Psychology Press.
- Scanlon, L. (2008). Adults' motives for returning to study: The role of self-authoring. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(1), 17-32.
- Scott, J. (2014). *Stratification and Power: Structures of class, Power, Status and Command*. Wiley & Sons.
- Sex Discrimination Act 1975.
- Sidler, M. (1997). Living in McJobdom: Third wave feminism and class inequity. *Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism*, 25-39.

- Sieber, J. E., & Stanley, B. (1988). Ethical and professional dimensions of socially sensitive research. *American Psychologist*, 43(1), 49.
- Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. Sage Publications Limited.
- Simons, H. (1981). *Conversation piece: The Practice of interviewing in Case Study Research, in Clem Ademan ed., Uttering, Muttering; Collecting, Using and Reporting Talk for Social and Educational Research*. United Kingdom: Grant McIntyre.
- Slattery, M. (2003). *Key ideas in sociology*. Nelson Thornes.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. University of Toronto Press.
- Snyder, R. C. (2008). What is third-wave feminism? A new directions essay. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34(1), 175-196.
- Snyder-Hall, R. C. (2010). Third-wave feminism and the defense of "choice". *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(01), 255-261.
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Stanley, L., & Wise, S. (1990). Method, methodology and epistemology in feminist research processes. *Feminist praxis: Research, theory and epistemology in feminist sociology*, 20-60.
- Stenhouse, L. (1975). *An introduction to curriculum research and development*. London: Heinemann Educational Ltd.
- Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories - the mature age student experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(2), 263-290.
- Stone, C., & O' Shea, S. (2013). Time, money, leisure and guilt - the gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 53(1), 95-116.
- Sudbury, J. (1998). *Other Kinds of Dreams: Black Women's Organisations and the Politics of Transformation*. London: Routledge.
- Sutton Trust. (2000). *Entry to leading universities*. London: Sutton Trust.
- Tashakkori, A. and Teddlie, C. (eds) (2003). *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioural Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thacker, C and Novak, M (1991). The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, Vol.XXI-I, 1991 La revue canadienne d'enseignement superieur. Vol.XXI-I, 1991 Student Role

- Supports Younger and Older Middle Aged Women: Application of a Life Event Model.
Charlene Thacker and Mark Novack.
- The Butler Act (1944).
- The Coalition: or programme for government. (2010). Retrieved from
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf.
- The Foster Act (1870).
- The Government Equalities Office. (2011). Legislative measures to promote equal pay. IA
No. GEO1029 Date: 17/01/2011.
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus.
Journal of Education Policy, 17(4), 423-442.
- Thomas, L. (Ed.). (2005). *Widening participation in post-compulsory education*. A & C
Black.
- Thomas, L. and Jamieson-Ball, C. (2011). *Engaging Students to Improve Student Retention and
Success in Higher Education in Wales*. York: Higher Education Academy.
- Tong, R. P (2013:1998). *Feminist thought: A comprehensive introduction*. New York:
Routledge.
- Tony, B. (1998). *The Third Way*. London: Fabian Society.
- Tysome, T. (2004). Sector caught in parent trap. Times Higher Educational Supplement, 30
July.
- UCAS (2017). <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/undergraduate/getting-started/mature-undergraduate-students>
- University of Warwick's Institute for Employment for the Higher Education Careers Service
Unit (HECSU) (2013/14)
- Vogel, L. (2013). *Marxism and the oppression of women: Toward a unitary theory*. Brill.
- Wadham, J., Robinson, A., & Ruebain, D. (2010). *Blackstone's guide to the Equality Act 2010*.
Oxford University Press, USA.
- Walby, S., Armstrong, J., & Strid, S. (2012). Intersectionality: Multiple inequalities in social
theory. *Sociology*, 46(2), 224-240.
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Walby, S. (1997). *Gender Transformations*. London: Routledge.

- Waldfoegel, J. (1998). Understanding the "family gap" in pay for women with children. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 12(1), 137-156.
- Walker, R. (1985). *Applied qualitative research*. Gower Pub Co.
- Walker, R. (1995). *To Be Real Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*.
- Walkerdine, V. (1990). *Schoolgirl fictions*. London: Verso Books.
- Walter, N. (1998). *The new feminism* London: Little, Brown.
- Walters, M. (2005). *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Walker, R. (2006). "'Becoming the Third Wave,' from Ms. Magazine." In Heywood 2006, 3–5.
- Warrington, M. (2005). 'Mirage in the desert? Access to educational opportunities in an area of social exclusion', *Antipode*, vol 37(4), pp.796-816.
- Weber, M. (1964). *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Wellington, J. (2000). *Educational Research: contemporary issues and practical approaches*, London: Continuum.
- Wellington, J. J., Bathmaker, A. M., Hunt, C., McCulloch, G., & Sikes, P. (2005). *Succeeding with your Doctorate*. Sage.
- Whitney, B. (2007). *Social Inclusion in Schools, Improving Outcomes, Raising Standards*. London New York: Routledge.
- Whyte, J. (1986). *Girls into science and technology: The story of a project*. Taylor & Francis.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in higher education*, 30(6), 707-722.
- Wilkinson, S. (1998, January). Focus groups in feminist research: Power, interaction, and the co-construction of meaning. In *Women's studies international forum* (Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 111-125). Pergamon.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs*. Columbia University Press.

- Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs: with and introduction with Stanley Arowowitz* (Morningside Edition). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wiseman, J. P., & Aron, M. S. (1972). *Field Reports in Sociology*.
- Wolf, N. (1993). *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How to Use It*. New York: Ballentine Books.
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792). *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.
- Woodrow, M. & Yorke, M. (2002). *Social class and participation: good practice in widening access to higher education*. London: Universities UK.
- Wrye, H. K. (2009). The fourth wave of feminism: Psychoanalytic perspectives introductory remarks. *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 10(4), 185-189.
- Yorke, M., & Thomas, L. (2003). Improving the retention of students from lower socio-economic groups. *Journal of higher education policy and management*, 25(1), 63-74.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory*. Indiana, United States: Indiana University.

Appendix

Appendix A. Ethical Approval from the Faculty

Appendix B. Participant Information Sheet

Appendix C. Invitation Letter

Appendix D. Consent Form

Appendix E. Overview of Participants

Appendix F. Interview Guide

Appendix G. An adapted stage of analysis model taken from Cohen et al., (2007)

Ethical Approval Form

Dear Lindsay

Thank you for your recent application to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee for approval, for your project entitled

The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education

In reviewing applications, the Committee refers to the criteria set out in the University of Chester Research Governance Handbook.

I am pleased to inform you that your application was reviewed by the committee (on Wednesday 12th February 2014) and has been granted approval to move on to the next stage.

Whilst approval has been granted on the basis of your information provided, please note that **if there are any changes to your study you will need to submit an updated proposal for further consideration.**

It is recommended that you maintain regular contact with your supervisor in order to ensure that your study continues to meet with ethical standards.

Please also note that attached to this letter is an **‘End of Project Report Form’**. You will need to submit this to the ethics committee once you have completed your project.

We wish you every success with your research,

Kind regards,

Dr Jane McKay
Chair of Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education & Children’s Services
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ

Please direct all correspondence relating to ethics applications to: educationethics@chester.ac.uk



Participant information sheet

'The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education'

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of the study is to find out women's experiences of returning to education. It aims to gather an insight from a variety of women through their personal accounts and experiences. A written report will be produced at the end of the project.

Exploring questions such as;

- What are the experiences of women who have returned to HE as mature students and completed an undergraduate or postgraduate course of study?
- How do women who have returned to education to study at higher educational level perceive themselves as learners?
- What are the aspirations of women who have returned to education as mature students and completed a HE qualification?
- What are the factors that have motivated them to embark on a HE course of study?
- How is HE conceptualised by women returning to HE as mature students?

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are a previous HE student who has completed either an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your studies in any way. Therefore, participants are free to withdraw from the study at any time without any adverse effect.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. This will give your consent for me to contact you to invite you to attend an interview. You will have the opportunity to raise and discuss your views relating to inter-professional working. There will be about four other women taking part in the research, and individual interviews will be led by a researcher (myself) and will last about an hour. With your permission, the interviews will be audio taped. No-one will be identifiable in the final report.

What are the proposed protocol and research timings?

I hope to gain consent from the ethics board and all participants by 2015. Participant invitation letters and information sheets outlining the research process will be sent to all potential participants and I will then arrange and confirm their participation. I will then conduct the research between November 2016-January 2017 alongside debriefing all participants. Throughout the whole project there will be an on-going review of the literature. The analysis and evaluation of the data collected will take place from February 2017 to July 2017 with a proposed final submission date of the completed research of August 2017.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no disadvantages or risks foreseen in taking part in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

As a participant it is possible that you may welcome the opportunity to share and discuss your views in relation to your experiences. By taking part, you will be contributing to knowledge through a small-scale project in specific relation to mature women's experiences of returning to education.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during this study, please contact:

Dr Jane McKay
Chair of Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education & Children's Services
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information which is collected about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only I as the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information. All information will be anonymous and kept securely in a security password protected file/locked cabinet.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The findings will be written up into a report to be accessed by the University of Chester as part of my EdD qualification. It is hoped that the findings may be used to illustrate the views of women who have decided to return to education at a later stage in their lives. Individuals who participate will not be identified in any subsequent report or publication.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research will be organised, funded and conducted by me as a final year student completing a thesis as part of my EdD.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide if you would be willing to take part, please contact me:

Lindsay Hanrahan
Researcher/EdD Student
University of Chester
Email: 0915587@chester.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.



Invitation letter

Dear _____,

I am inviting you to participate in a study based on '*The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education*'. Please find enclosed a copy of a participant information sheet that provides an overview of the aims on objectives alongside other relevant information. If you wish to participate in this opportunity can you, please complete and return the enclosed consent form. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and for expressing an interest in this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any additional information,

Kind regards,

Lindsay Hanrahan.

Lindsay Hanrahan

Researcher/ Student

University of Chester

Email: 0915587@chester.ac.uk



Consent form

Title of Project:

'The experience of women as mature students in Higher Education'

Name of Researcher:

Lindsay Shannon

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated,
for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my studies being affected. ☐
3. I understand that interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. I give permission for any material gathered and selections of these recordings to be used as part of the final publication of the research report. ☐
4. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Name of Person taking consent
(if different from researcher)

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Overview of study group

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years since completing qualification</i>	<i>Previous qualifications</i>	<i>Qualification/s achieved</i>	<i>Previous role/s</i>	<i>Current role/s</i>
Lucy (Living with long term partner, Mother of 2 older children)	40	3	Access to science qualification.	Undergraduate degree in Children's Nursing.	Science Technician. Learning Mentor. Bed Manager.	Children's Nurse.
Jill (Married, mother of 2 older children)	40	1	GCSE Maths and English at grade C and above.	Foundation degree with top up in Children and Young People Services.	Administration. Learning Mentor, Attendance and Common Assessment Framework Coordinator. Early Intervention Worker.	Senior Early Intervention Worker.
Zoe (Lone mother to 1 younger child).	24	1	7 GCSE's at grade C and above. BTEC in Health and Social Care with Distinction.	Undergraduate degree in Nursing.	Senior Care Assistant.	Adult Nurse.

Sally (Married , mother to 3 older children) .	50	4	5 O' Levels at grade C and above. 3 A Levels.	Undergradu ate degree in Fine Art.	Manager (Media Advertiseme nt). Self- employed.	Self- employed Artist.
Ruby (Married , mother to 2 younger children) .	41	5	7 GCSE's at grade C and above and 3 A Levels.	Undergradu ate degree in Sport Science.	Child Minder. Teaching Assistant. School Governor.	Fulltime Carer.

Interview guide

(This guide was only used as a prompt and was not a prescriptive or fixed list in the interview process)

- Can you describe your life before embarking on a course of study at university?
- What motivated you and made you decide to embark on a course of study and return to Higher Education?
- Have other family members or friends completed a course of study at Higher Education?
- What has been the most important source of encouragement for you?
- Can you describe your first call or contact to the admissions department about starting a course?
- Can you recall and describe the first session of going to university? What was it like?
- Can you please tell me in your own words your experience/journey of returning to education as a mature student?
- What was your experience as learner?
- What was your understanding and experiences of listening to the tutor?
- What were your expectations about your studies?
- Can you recall and describe the requirements outlined by the academic staff?
- Did you feel that you fitted in?
- What has been the impact of studying on your life?
- What are the biggest challenges you have had to face in returning to learning?
- How have you tried to overcome these challenges?
- Do you think that returning to education has been influential on your personal or professional development?
- Please describe any studying that you would like to do in the future.

Analysis Framework Model

(An adapted stage of analysis model taken from Cohen et al., 2007)

Stage	Action	Comments
Transcription : Begin to collate and present the data into an organised format.	Transcribe 5 interviews.	I attempted to reduce the textual data collected from the interviews into themes so that I could interpret the information and then address the initial research question.
Coding: Using thematic analysis techniques such as the use of coding and themes as a framework to structure the information ascertained and organise the data into manageable categories such as challenges to learning and networks of support.	Begin to code the data using a colour coded system to highlight themes within the transcripts.	<p>I could identify links within the data collected and see how particular topics resonated with many participants/interviews.</p> <p>It was also beneficial to use this process to further critique the literature previously examined and investigate any issues that were earlier discussed in the literature review section. This allowed me to revisit the appropriateness of the areas previously explored.</p>
Grouping of data.	Arrange data into themes and identify links amongst the accounts.	I was also mindful not to assume that any topics not discussed were not relevant due to the uniqueness of the participant's

		<p>accounts and in their settings.</p> <p>Through the patterns of information that was emerging, I could appreciate the richness and descriptiveness of the data based on their individual circumstances.</p>
<p>Presentation of data: Categorise the findings into an organised system to interpret and present the data.</p>	<p>Identify categories;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivations and aspirations • Challenges to learning • Networks of support • Learning communities. 	<p>I could code most topics into distinctive areas but due to the individuality of the women's experiences the examples given were inevitably subjective based on their experiences.</p> <p>Consequently, this required the accounts to be reviewed both individually and considering any shared experiences or potential group classifications.</p>